JON ATHAN

LOVESICK

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Jon Athan

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This book contains scenes of intense violence and some disturbing themes. Some parts of this book may be considered violent, cruel, disturbing, or unusual. This book is *not* intended for those easily offended or appalled. Please enjoy at your own discretion.

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Chapter One

Your Blood

“Alright, hun, let’s make this quick. It’s five for a handy, ten for a BJ, and twenty for everything else,” Dakota Foley said, her voice monotone. “I don’t take it in the ass, even if you got a small dick, but I swallow for no extra charge. It’s just, you know, a bonus. Some guys like it, some don’t. Whatever, it’s up to you. So, what are you looking for, hun? I don’t got all night.”

Mark Murray stared at her with a deadpan expression from the driver’s seat of his little red hatchback. He looked at his reflection on the rearview mirror. His dull brown eyes said something along the lines of: *what are you doing here, man? Are you sure about this?* He looked out the windshield, then out the window to his left. They were parked in a dirty alley in a seedy neighborhood at the dead of night.

Dakota sniffled, scratched her dirty blonde hair, and reached for the door handle. She was ready to leave if her John turned out to be a psycho, but she also wanted to conduct some business. Money paid for her drug addiction and she was itching for a hit of black tar heroin. She could already feel the drug flowing through her veins, her blood like acid—*burning.*

She said, “Listen, if this is your first time… it’s okay. Whatever, right? What-*ever*. Don’t worry about it. Just pay me and get it over with. What are you looking for? A blowjob? Hmm?”

Mark looked at her again. He couldn’t guess her age. She looked like she was in her forties, but she spoke like a twentysomething college student. He knew she was homeless. He could tell from her tattered clothes—which she wore in many layers—her grimy skin, and her stench. But none of it bothered him. In fact, he targeted the woman. He picked her out like a prostitute at a brothel.

Dakota ran her eyes over him while wrapping her delicate fingers around the door handle. Mark stood five-nine with a firm chest and thick arms. He exercised to compensate for the acne scars drilled into his face and back. His black hair was wavy, thick curls hanging over his forehead. His eyes

were glazed with depression. He didn't look intimidating, but he wasn't exactly charismatic or even approachable.

He was a twenty-six-year-old man—a *simple* man. His style was nothing special. He was forgettable, always blending with the walls and crowds around him.

Breaking the silence, Dakota said, "I'm not saying I know everyone, but I've never seen you around these parts. No, nah, *uh-uh.* Our regulars are usually blue-collar workers. You know, janitors, plumbers, truckers… people like that." She looked at his hands, examining each bare finger, and she said, "They're usually married, too. I don't know why they come to junkies like us just for a quick blowjob or a nasty fuck, but they do. They always do. It's a power thing, right? They're happily married with families and all that shit, but they just want the thrill of 'paying for it' and they want to 'dominate' a bitch, right? Can't do that to their wives, I guess… But you're not like that. You're different. Who are you?"

Mark finally opened his mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. His voice was trapped in his throat, blocked by his uvula. His clammy palms slid across the steering wheel, his arms shaking gently. He had spoken to escorts online before, but he never met a real prostitute in person. He was nervous—anxious, *shy.*

Dakota said, "Maybe you're a cop, an undercover on his first operation, but I doubt that. They would have already busted my ass… and yours 'cause you're a terrible actor. Maybe you're some wannabe serial killer. You know, you're just trying to work up the courage to kill me right now. That sounds more likely. Hell, maybe you're both. You never know nowadays, do you? So, am I right?"

Mark gritted his teeth, tightened his grip on the steering wheel, and glared at her. He wasn't angry at her, though. He was frustrated with himself. *Just say what you have to say already, damn it*, he told himself.

"It doesn't matter," Dakota said. "I might look weak, but don't get it twisted, *buddy.* I'm armed and I'll shoot you if you try anything funny. And I ain't playing with you. You hear me? I've shot Johns before. I'll shoot you in the head, the chest, the dick, the ass… I'll shoot you anywhere. You better believe that."

Mark huffed, then he said, "I'm not a cop or a serial killer. If I were, you'd be dead and stuffed into my trunk already. I work at a fast food joint.

That's it. Nothing special." He looked at the steering wheel and said, "I don't want to fuck you. I don't even want you to touch me. You… *You're dirty.*"

"Dirty? Is that right? Okay, alright. Well, 'Mr. Clean,' what do you and your pizza face want with little ol' me?"

Mark glared at her, turning his head so fast he nearly snapped his own neck. Dakota cracked a slight smile, trying to keep a semblance of confidence. She was scared of him, she saw the fire of fury burning in his eyes, but she was also curious. Mark was a different type of John—a man from the other side of the world. *Not sex*, she thought, *so what do you want?*

His eyes stuck on her, Mark said, "I won't pay you for sex. I know that's your specialty, but you can get that idea out of your head." Dakota turned and tugged on the door handle. Mark said, "Wait a minute."

Dakota stopped, her back to Mark. She glanced back at him while grabbing the pocket knife in her jacket pocket. She wasn't armed with a handgun—that was just a bluff.

"*What?*" Dakota said as she carefully unfolded the knife in her pocket.

"I won't pay you to fuck, but I will pay you for something else."

"Get to the point. What do you want from me?"

"I want your blood."

"What? My… My blood?"

"*Your blood*."

Dakota was awed by the revelation. In her short career as a prostitute, she had received some strange requests: *pee on my face, slap my testicles, chew on my cock, can I call you 'mother?'* But no one ever asked for her blood.

Mark pulled a hypodermic syringe out of the glove department. He wagged it at her and said, "I'll pay you *a lot* of money for *one* syringe full of your blood. Just one."

Dakota pushed her tongue against the side of her mouth and rolled her eyes as she thought about the offer. After a mere fifteen seconds, she released the knife in her pocket, crossed her arms, and leaned back in her seat. She nodded at him, as if to say: *go on.*

"I know that you are HIV-positive," Mark explained as he grabbed a pair of latex gloves from the glove department and slid them on. "You might not

have seen me, but I've been wandering this 'neighborhood' for weeks looking for a girl like you. Your, um… Your 'neighbors,' if you can call them that, told me about you. They said you got tested recently. They said you tested positive. And they said you were still walking these streets—*still working.* I get it, too. You're homeless. You need money for… whatever. That part doesn't matter to me. The point is: I can give you money. I just need you to give me some of your blood. It's… It's easier than having sex for cash, isn't it? I mean, when you think about it, it's just like going to the doctor."

"Except you're not a doctor. You flip burgers at some fast food place."

"That's right. I'm not a doctor. But I know how to use this and I have cash. Do we have a deal or not?"

What if I say 'no?'—that was the first question to enter Dakota's mind. Her survival was her main concern after all. Then she questioned his intentions. Truth be told, she was fascinated by the request.

She asked, "Why do you need my blood?"

"It doesn't matter. It's just very, *very* important to me. I have… I don't know how to explain it. I just have some big plans for the future and I need your blood. That's all I can tell you."

"Big plans, huh? Are you one of those 'bugchasers' or whatever they call 'em? I think I met a guy like you before. He didn't ask for my blood, though. No, he wanted to fuck me in the ass. He thought I was a guy—a tranny, you know?—and he wanted what I had. He wanted HIV for some reason. I was a little offended because he thought I looked like a damn man, but I actually forgot about it until now. So, are you like him? You chasin' bugs?"

Mark nodded and said, "I guess you can think of me like that. I need 'bugs.' I need *a lot* of bugs. It's important to me and my future. I don't think you need to know all of the details. If you knew what I was up to… you'd probably give up on humanity and kill yourself." He looked at her from head-to-toe, trying his best not to sneer in disgust. He said, "Or probably not. I still won't tell you. Just give me your answer. I'll give you one-hundred dollars, right here and right now, for a syringe of your blood. Do we have a deal or not?"

Dakota slid her tongue over her teeth and nodded as she hesitated. She looked out the windshield. A gust of wind dragged a wet, torn newspaper

across the alleyway. A homeless man struck the side of a dumpster with the steel lid of a trashcan while babbling to himself about politics. From the rearview mirror, she saw a friend—a fellow prostitute—soliciting a John in a 1999 Cadillac Deville.

She met eyes with Mark. Although she wasn't frightened of him anymore, she figured he'd attack her if she rejected his offer. She didn't feel right selling her blood, but she needed the money.

She said, "Throw in an extra twenty and we have a deal."

"I can do that, sure. Thank you. Thank you very much."

Mark handed her a one-hundred-dollar bill and a twenty-dollar bill. He pulled the cap off the needle. He pushed down on the syringe's plunger, then he pulled it back, then he pushed it down again. He looked at Dakota's arms. Track marks, old and new, scarred her limbs. Some resembled scabs and bruises while some of her veins looked black and raised.

Mark asked, "Are you ready?"

"Just do it before I change my mind," Dakota said as she turned and looked out the passenger seat window.

Mark drew a deep breath and nodded. He punctured her thick basilic vein with the needle. Then, he carefully pulled back on the plunger. Twelve milliliters of Dakota's blood filled the barrel of the syringe. The funny thing about blood was: *it all looked the same*. Dakota's blood was crimson-red, like every human on earth, but it hid a dangerous virus that was imperceptible to the human eye.

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Chapter Two

The Party

“Are you okay?” Maribel Gomez asked.

Mark closed his eyes and shook his head slowly, as if he were trying to snap out of a trance. He took a swig of his beer, which sloshed in a red cup in his right hand—his sweaty, *shaky* hand. Anxiety flowed through his veins, doubt clouded his mind, and rage burned in his heart. The combination made him a nervous wreck. He looked absentminded, sick, and angry at the same time.

Maribel giggled, then she asked, “Are you shitfaced already? You’ve had, like, two beers.”

Mark lowered the cup to his lap and, without making eye contact, he responded, “I know. I’m not drunk. Not even close.”

“Oh, *really?* Okay, so what’s going on? You look… *different*, Mark. Come on, don’t make me ask you like some annoying mom. You’re going to make me do it, aren’t you? Okay, okay… Are you on drugs?”

Mark looked at Maribel with a blank expression—uninterested, bored, *cold*. The young woman, on the other hand, giggled at her own joke. They sat on a fuzzy Sherpa sofa in the living room of a two-story house. Music blared from the sound system on the entertainment center. Partygoers, some younger than twenty-one, filled the rooms while drinking beer from red cups and chatting with each other.

It was an old-fashioned house party for friends of *all* ages.

Mark sighed, then he said, “I’m not on drugs or anything like that, ‘mom.’ You know, I just have a lot on my mind tonight.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

“No?” Maribel repeated as she snickered. The blunt response caught her off guard. She patted Mark’s shoulder, then she said, “Okay, well, I will *respect* your decision, sir. I just… I want you to know that I’m here for you if you need to talk about anything. *We* are here for you. I’m not the only one

that noticed your moping. So, come chat when you have time. I'll be around. Have a great night, Mark."

"You too, you too…"

Mark watched as Maribel stood from the sofa and wandered from person-to-person—*mingling.* She was a good friend, a peer since high school, but she couldn't solve his problems. He looked at the other guests. He recognized some of them as former classmates, close neighbors, and even current coworkers. He didn't know anyone from the younger crowd.

He saw the concern written on his friends' faces—dim eyes, pouting lips, clenched teeth. They cared about him, but if Maribel couldn't get through to him, they feared there was nothing they could do to help.

Mark looked directly in front of him. Beyond the glass coffee table, there was another three-seat Sherpa sofa. He couldn't stop himself from staring at the young woman on that sofa.

Rebecca Lucio was a twenty-six-year-old bartender. She earned more than Mark off of tips alone. She stood five-four with a curvy figure. Her breasts were large, her stomach was soft but flat, and her hips were wide. Her long black hair—as black as a night in a desert—contrasted against her clean, pale skin. She wore a white tank top, tight jeans, and black boots, and she sat on top of a black jacket.

The side of Mark's mouth rose into a slight smile. He thought: *you're the most beautiful woman in the world, I love your smile.*

"Why can't I be the reason you smile like that?" he whispered, barely audible due to the loud music—some pop song that *no one* actually cared about.

Nick Moreno sat beside Rebecca, one arm over her shoulder and one hand on her thigh. At twenty-three years old, he recently graduated with a degree in marketing. He was in the middle of a break, traveling the world with his parents' money and enjoying the freedom of life before settling down in a high-paying career in marketing. To most, he was a lucky and *cocky* hot-shot—but he was a likable one.

He was handsome and charismatic. He stood six-two with a slim but strong physique. His face was clean and chiseled, like a Greek sculpture in a museum. His hazel eyes were soft and welcoming. There wasn't a trace of hatred, sadness, or duplicity in his eyes. His head was shaved along the

sides, leaving only some wavy black hair on top. He was stylish, even when he wasn't trying.

Mark had been watching them all night. Rebecca and Nick sat close together, drinking beer and whispering at each other. They practically cuddled in the center of the living room—in the middle of a house party. Nick smirked and leaned in for a kiss. Rebecca blushed and leaned away, but she stayed close enough to feel his breath on her face and neck.

"You want to kiss him, don't you? Right here and right now," Mark whispered. "Go ahead and do it. Come on, get it over with already."

Rebecca whispered something into Nick's ear. She said something along the lines of: *not here* or *maybe later.* She patted Nick's arm and said goodbye, as if she were speaking to a regular friend, then she went to the kitchen for another drink. Nick stood up, locked eyes with Mark, and then he snickered and walked away.

Following him with his eyes, Mark muttered, "Who the hell do you think you are, you spoiled brat? You piece of shit, you stupid asshole, you… you…"

He stopped as Rebecca approached him with two cups of beer. She sat down beside him and handed him a drink. Then she kissed him.

They were a couple.

Mark and Rebecca had been dating for over three years. They met at Rebecca's workplace—a bar called 'The Green Flamingo.' Their relationship wasn't perfect, there were bumps on the road, but they always cared about each other. Mark believed their relationship was serious. He dreamed of marriage. As cliché as it sounded, Rebecca loved him, but she wasn't *in* love with him anymore. She simply didn't have the courage to end it.

Acting as if she didn't just flirt with Nick, Rebecca asked, "So, how are you liking the party, hun?"

Mark took a sip of his new beer, then he said, "It's alright."

"Just alright? You're not having any fun?"

"I'm having fun. I *am* having fun. It's good, Rebecca."

Rebecca smiled nervously, then she said, "It doesn't sound good. You're talking in that voice. You know, that… that 'I'm annoyed'-voice. Are you mad?"

Mark looked over at the foyer of the home. He spotted Nick talking to a young blonde woman. She couldn't have been older than twenty years old. Mark clenched his fist, gritted his teeth, and inhaled deeply through his nose. He couldn't control his jealousy. And, although he felt his eyes piercing into him, Nick didn't bother to acknowledge him. He was only looking for a good time.

Mark looked down at his cup and said, "I'm fine. I'm just getting a little sleepy. I had a long week at work. A lot of, um… burger flipping. It's not some big, important advertising job, but it's still a job. So I'm tired. That's all there is to it."

That's not all, Rebecca thought. She wasn't stupid, she could connect the pieces. Since he mentioned a 'big, important marketing job,' she figured her boyfriend was jealous of Nick—and that was exactly what she wanted. She hoped Mark would break up with her so she could move on without feeling like an awful person. For normal, empathetic people, breakups weren't easy for either party.

Rebecca asked, "Do you want to go home now?"

"I do, but I know you don't want to leave."

Rebecca forced a smile and said, "Well, of course I don't want to leave already, hun. I mean, we just got here. We have friends to talk to, music to dance to… *life* to celebrate. It's a party, and I'm having fun. But I'll leave with you if you want to go. Just say it and we'll go, okay? Seriously, Mark, I'm fine with anything."

Mark thought about saying: *yes, let's go home.* The party—his friends and neighbors, their happiness and carelessness—drained him. Their joy wasn't contagious. Instead, it added fuel to his fire of depression. Yet, despite his anger and frustration, he couldn't force Rebecca to leave with him. He wanted to look confident around her and his peers.

He didn't want to be the insecure boyfriend who dragged his girlfriend home because of his insecurities—not around Nick, at least.

He swallowed the rest of his beer in one swig, then he said, "I'll go, you stay."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, of course," Mark said, a soft smile on his face. "It's not a big deal, Rebecca. Stay, drink, dance. I want you to have fun tonight, okay?"

Rebecca rubbed his thigh and asked, “Are you sure about this? You won’t be mad if I stay?”

“Oh, come on, when have I ever been mad at you? Stay and have fun. Just call me or text me whenever you get home. I want to make sure you’re safe.”

“Yeah, I’ll… I’ll do that. Thank you, hun.”

“I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

Rebecca pulled her lips into her mouth and hesitated. She thought: *what do I say to that? I can’t keep going like this, can I?* For a second—just a second—she considered breaking up with him in the middle of that party. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t say she loved him, either. So, she planted a long, passionate kiss on his lips.

Smiling, she rubbed his hand and said, “I’ll text you. Good night, baby. Good night…”

She took a deep breath, then she stood up and walked away from him. She headed straight to the kitchen for another drink, hoping to drown her guilt in alcohol.

Tears crept up to Mark’s eyes and clung to his eyelashes. He struggled to swallow the lump in his throat. *Don’t cry,* he told himself, *not here, don’t cry.* He hurried out of the house without saying goodbye to any of his peers. He didn’t even offer a wave or a nod. Outside, he hopped into his hatchback and sped away. During his drive home, he listened to *Creep* by Radiohead and cried until he couldn’t cry anymore.

Rebecca didn’t call or message him that night.

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Chapter Three

Renovations

Mark sat in the driver's seat of his hatchback, parked in front of an abandoned apartment building. Through his windshield, he looked up at the broken streetlamp above him. He noticed all of the streetlamps were either broken or inactive. Only his headlights illuminated the dark street. In the alleyways, homeless people lit fires in steel trashcans and dumpsters for warmth and light.

A few delinquent teenagers, rowdy gangbangers, and homeless people wandered the streets. There were no cops in sight. All of the buildings in the neighborhood were abandoned, vandalized and condemned. Some of the apartment buildings were used by the homeless as shelters, others were deemed uninhabitable even by the transients.

"It's perfect," Mark said as he looked over the quiet, desolate area. "We can call this 'home.' Yeah, I can do this. I *can* do this."

He hopped out of the car, a backpack slung over his shoulder and a heavy duffel bag in his right hand. The supplies in his bags *clinked* and *clanked* and *rattled* as he made his way to the five-story apartment building to his left. The front door was gone, so he just waltzed in. He pulled a flashlight out of his bag and illuminated his path.

The door opened up to a hallway. Trash flooded the cracked, begrimed floors—newspapers covered in urine and feces, garbage bags and torn clothing, dirty condoms and used syringes. A rainbow of graffiti decorated the walls and ceiling. A malodorous stench stained the *entire* building—gallons of stale sweat blended with a bubbling concoction of diarrhea and urine with a pinch of death.

Aside from a few rats scurrying between the piles of garbage, the first floor appeared to be vacant.

Pinching his nose, Mark walked up the stairs to his right. He shone his light into the second-floor hallway. It wasn't as congested with garbage, but it was still a mess. It wasn't his stop anyway. He moved up the stairs, his

boots *clacking* on each step. He examined each floor, searching for any lingering ‘guests.’ He found nothing but trash and hopelessness.

As he reached the fifth floor, shining the beam of light over every inch of the hall, Mark said, “This is it. It’s the perfect location, the perfect place for our future.”

He approached the last apartment in the hallway—the only apartment with an intact door. He pushed the door open and peeked inside. It was a one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment. The front door opened up to the living room, which was seamlessly connected to a small kitchen space. To the left, there were two doors. The first door led to the bathroom, the second to the bedroom.

There was a wooden coffee table under the window at the end of the living room. Two of its legs were broken on one of its short sides, leaving it slanted like a ramp. Two overturned chairs, similarly damaged, lay beside the coffee table. A refrigerator stood beside the kitchen counters, its doors torn off and removed from the apartment.

Mark drew a deep breath, then he took his first step into the home. He smiled as the floorboards *creaked* under his boot. Tears welled in his eyes while his nose and lips twitched. He wasn’t sad or scared. He was overjoyed and excited. He felt like he was taking control of his life for the first time in years. His insecurities couldn’t stop him from moving forward with his plan—*with his future*.

He made his decision, and he wasn’t going to quit.

Tears rolling down his rosy cheeks, he dropped his bags and said, “Okay. Let’s get started.”

Mark spent the night renovating the apartment. On the front door, he replaced the old, dusty doorknob with a keyless door lever. He set the keypad code to: *1451*. Then he installed a deadbolt on the front door, ensuring no one would enter the apartment during his stay. He replaced the bedroom door’s doorknob, too. The code was set to: *1541*.

He placed unlit rose-scented candles on the floor along the walls of the living room. He placed some on the kitchen counters, too. He figured the candles would help with the stench. The bathroom was insignificant to his plans, so he moved into the bedroom with the rest of his supplies.

Like the living room and kitchen, a few remnants of the past remained in the bedroom. Posters of David Bowie, Queen, and other rock bands—torn

to shreds but recognizable—clung to the walls. Tattered clothing, garbage bags, and old sheets of corrugated fiberboard covered the floor. A gaping hole was *punched* into the closet door. A steel bed frame sat at the center of the room, covered in rust and cobwebs.

Mark clicked his tongue, then he said, “I’ll have to bring in a mattress later. Something cheap, nothing special. Everything’s fine. Yeah, it’s okay.”

He pulled a roll of soundproofing composite out of the duffel bag. At one-inch thick, it was heavy, flexible, and impermeable. It could dampen the vibrations of sound—from a bloodcurdling scream to a whisper, a thunderous drum to a regular clap. He nailed the composite to the bedroom walls, effectively soundproofing the room.

Then he placed more candles along the walls and beside the bed frame. He pulled a bag of rose petals out of his backpack. He scattered the petals around the bed and created a trail to the door.

Romance lived on.

After decorating the room with the petals, he pulled a small leather case out of his backpack. He opened the case and looked inside. A vial of blood was securely strapped into the case. Handwritten, a white label on the vial read: *HIV.* There were four empty vials beside the small bottle of blood.

He already knew he had packed the vial, but he needed to be sure. It was important—*very* important. He closed the case and carefully placed it on the closet floor, hiding it in the shadows.

Mark went back to the trunk of his hatchback. He retrieved a pile of planks and another bag of long, sturdy nails. He returned to the renovated apartment. He boarded up the windows in the living room and bedroom. He didn’t expect any peeping Toms to float up to the fifth floor—but better safe than sorry.

For his last modification, he placed a motion-activated camera on the kitchen counter and another in the corner of the bedroom. If anyone managed to enter the apartment while he was away, he wanted pictures in order to find them. He didn’t plan on explaining himself to them, either.

“What’s with all the goddamn noise up here?!” a man with a gruff voice shouted from the hall.

Mark stopped nailing another plank over the living room window, the hammer shaking over his shoulder. He stared absently at the thick piece of wood as he listened to the approaching footsteps. A million questions ran

through his mind: *who the hell is that? Is he going to ruin my plans before I can even start? Will I have to hurt him? Can I actually hurt another person?* He didn't have time to answer his own questions.

The footsteps stopped in the doorway.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

Mark slowly turned his head and glanced over his shoulder. A homeless man—Duncan Stewart—leaned against the door frame and examined the renovations, his eyes narrowed in curiosity. His coats *whooshed* as he teetered into the apartment. He wasn't inebriated, though. His right leg was injured, perhaps during a street fight or a car accident.

Don't show any fear, Mark told himself, *he's not a threat, you can beat this guy if it gets down to that.* He approached Duncan and met him at the center of the living room. He tightened his grip on the hammer, ready to swing at the first sign of trouble. He didn't know if he could actually attack a person, but he was desperate. And desperate people were the most dangerous.

Glaring at his uninvited guest, Mark said, "This is my home now. This apartment… No, this *building* belongs to me—*all of it.* Every floor, every apartment, every room. Do you understand me?'

Duncan stared at him with a blank face, then he smirked and chuckled. He staggered again, struggling to stay on his feet.

He said, "I don't get it, man. Wha–What are you saying?"

"I'm saying: I want *you* and everyone like *you* to stay out of this building."

"What? You don't own this place, asshole. This is *everyone's* home. We stay here when it rains and when it's cold and… and whenever we want, man! What the hell are you yappin' about, guy? What are you doing here? Huh? If you really own this place now, then you gotta have a… a, what do you call 'em? A deed. You got a deed or some proof? Hmm?"

Undisturbed by the man's aggression, Mark pulled a clip of cash out of his pocket—two hundred and fifty dollars in twenty-and-ten-dollar bills. He put the money in Duncan's gloved hand without breaking eye contact.

He said, "I don't need a deed. I just need this building. You and your friends can stay somewhere else. Right?" Duncan looked down at the cash, baffled but curious. Mark said, "I'm paying *you* for this property. I don't know how much clout you hold out here, but I need you and everyone else

to stay out for a few months. After that, you can do whatever you want with the place."

Duncan teetered again as he shrugged, then he said, "I guess I can help you out. But I might need a little more cash every now and then if you want me to keep those other bastards out. It's like a full-time job, you know? I don't need health insurance or any of that crap. Just cash, guy. Whaddaya say? We got a deal?"

"We'll work something out, but, yeah, I can get you more cash. Sure, it's easy for me. But I need something else from you now."

"What?"

"I need information. Tell me something, um…"

"Duncan. The name's Duncan Stewart."

"Duncan," Mark repeated as he nodded. "Tell me something, Duncan: how often do cops patrol this area?"

Duncan scratched the wild black hair protruding from under his beanie. Dandruff fell to the floor, like snowfall during the winter.

He said, "Well, if I'm being truthful, I haven't seen any cops around here… *ever.* Maybe if someone ODs or something like that, but they don't really come out here unless they're called. And none of us call 'em 'cause we don't have phones. It's fucked up, isn't it? You'd think that they'd want to, you know, help us out and get–"

"You get any uninvited guests out here?" Mark interrupted. At the moment, he didn't care about the social problems plaguing the homeless community. He explained, "I mean, do any 'Good Samaritans' show up? You know, people who pass out clothes, food, and stuff like that. Or anyone who's not homeless? Anyone at all? Stupid teenagers, horny guys looking for hookers, junkies, gangbangers…"

"No, no, no. If any kids come through here, they're gone in minutes. They get scared off, you know? Ignorant sacks of shit…"

"What about the rest of them?"

"Horny guys looking for hookers?" Duncan repeated in an uncertain tone. He chuckled, then he said, "Hell, they're gone in minutes, too. They nut and they leave. They're not tourists or anything like that. Junkies… One way or another, we're all junkies around here, guy. You know what I mean? And… what was the last one?"

"*Gangbangers*," Mark said sternly.

“Gangbangers, yeah… No, I don’t really see ‘em around here, either. They just walk by sometimes. You’ll only find the homeless around these parts. Homelessness and desperation. That’s it.”

Mark couldn’t help but smile. The homeless man’s answers satisfied him. *It’s everything I hoped it would be,* he thought. He clenched his jaw and wiped the smile off his face. He couldn’t afford to show weakness around Duncan. He doubted his ability to hurt other people—he wasn’t a violent person after all—but he knew intimidation was key to his success.

Fear controlled people.

He tapped the hammer on Duncan’s chest, each consecutive strike hitting harder than the last. Duncan staggered back until he collided with the wall beside the front door. The blows didn’t hurt, but he was confused and even frightened by Mark’s action. He saw something in Mark’s eyes, too. He found himself gazing into a pit of hatred and despair.

He saw a dangerous man on the brink of going insane.

Mark said, “We have a deal, Duncan. But, I promise you: if I see you or anyone else anywhere near this building, you will pay. Don’t cross my path, don’t get on my bad side. I’m not in a good mood nowadays. Now, you can meet me over on Hill Street and Cooker Street every Sunday. I’ll pay you there as long as you keep up your end of the deal. Okay? Do we have an understanding?”

Duncan looked to his left, then to his right, as if he were expecting someone to show up and save him from the hammer-wielding, surely soon-to-be maniac. He didn’t have any other options, so he nodded.

He stuttered, “We–We got a–an understanding. I’ll see you Sunday, my guy.” The men locked eyes for ten seconds. Duncan smiled and said, “Bye.”

He stumbled away from Mark and made his way through the doorway. His lumbering, inconsistent footsteps drowned out his muttering, but Mark heard bits and pieces of his insults. The homeless man said something along the lines of: *crazy-ass*, *pizza-faced*, *greedy little bastard.*

“Always with the same ol’ pizza face insult, huh? You people need new material,” Mark whispered.

He went back to the window and continued securing the planks of wood. The whole situation was becoming normal to him.

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Chapter Four

Stakeout

“Why are you with him?” Mark whispered, his voice cracking like a middle school teenager’s. “Why are you torturing me like this? What did I do to deserve this? Am… Am I really that bad?”

With the sleeve of his coat, he wiped the tears from his eyes and the mucus from his pink nose. He looked down at his wet, shaky hand. *Damn anxiety,* he thought, *why can’t I be normal?* He grabbed his forearm as tightly as possible, pressing his fingers into his flesh until his hand stopped shaking. Bruises would undoubtedly develop along his forearm.

Through his windshield, he glared at the restaurant in front of him—the *Like Home Restaurant,* which served homestyle comfort food and innovative cocktails. The night was dark, stars obscured by smog and clouds, but he could see clearly into the establishment from the parking lot. The truth broke his weak, sensitive heart.

He saw families and friends sharing meals and drinks—Caesar salads, mac and cheese, oven-roasted chicken, fish tacos, barbecue baby back ribs, and cocktails, beer, wine, and soft drinks. He saw smiles and he heard laughter, he witnessed a celebration of life and love. Yet again, their genuine happiness annoyed him. It physically and mentally hurt him to see joy.

He stared at a couple sitting at a booth beside a tall window—Rebecca and Nick. He could see everything from his car.

Rebecca ordered the bacon mac and cheese while Nick had the fish and chips. Both of them ordered cocktails during the restaurant’s happy hour. *Who could resist five-dollar alcoholic beverages?*

But it wasn’t a regular dinner between two friends. They didn’t just share food and chat about the day. They fed each other and drank from each other’s cocktails. They held hands from across the table and even played footsies underneath it, like lovey-dovey teenagers on a date. They smirked, they blushed, they giggled, and *they kissed.*

Rebecca's smile glowed like a bright star on a clear night. She could cure a broken heart by simply glancing at a person. Her wide, sincere smile exposed her straight, clean teeth. Her teeth had a light-yellow tint, but that was natural. *Everything* about her was natural. And, in that restaurant, sitting across from Nick, she looked naturally happy and comfortable.

Mark wiped the sweat from his brow, then he swiped at his eyes again. As he stared at them, he smiled in disbelief and said, "Jesus Christ, Rebecca, I've never seen you smile like that. I mean, it's been too long since I've seen you *this* damn happy. You look… You look stunning. Why…" His voice trembled and his lips quivered. He whispered, "Why are you so happy without me?"

He frowned, then he smiled, and then he frowned again. He held his hand over his face, lowered his head to the steering wheel, and sobbed. His groaning, snorting, and coughing barely seeped past the sealed doors and windows of the hatchback. He tried to stop himself, but his emotions—*his memories*—easily overwhelmed him.

He said, "Rebecca, my baby, my sweetie, my queen… I still love you, but you're breaking my heart. I hate this feeling, I hate my bittersweet life." He smirked and chuckled as he leaned back in his seat. He said, "I'm a heartbroken hopeless romantic. It's pathetic, isn't it? Maybe I'm exactly what they say online… A cuck. *A goddamn cuck.*"

He looked at them again. Rebecca and Nick shared a decadent slice of raspberry chocolate cake. Rebecca fed Nick a bite, then Nick fed Rebecca. Nick even cleaned the side of Rebecca's mouth, rubbing his thumb on her plump lips sensually. His eyes twinkled with a rare gleam of endearment. He deeply cared about her, despite his playboy mannerisms.

Watching the interaction from afar, Mark said, "I'm lovesick, but it's not that type of sickness. Not like the stories or the books. Love is… It's… Oh God, it's really making me sick."

He tried to cover his mouth, but he was too slow. Dark orange vomit shot out of his mouth. He caught some of it in his hand while the rest splattered on his jacket, his jeans, and the steering wheel. With a steady, emotionless face, he waved his hand and watched as the puke flew every which way—landing on the steering wheel, the window, and even the ceiling of the car.

Then he casually wiped his palm on his jeans. The mess didn't bother him—not at all. Drenched in vomit, he sat quietly and patiently as he

continued to watch the date.

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His hands on ten and two, Mark leaned forward in his seat and tightly gripped the steering wheel. He weaved and bobbed his head, looking out the windshield and passenger seat window. He examined a small blue house on the corner—*Nick's house.* He didn't see them enter the house, but he found Nick's car parked upfront. He pieced it together. They were in there and he knew it.

"Come on, where are you? What the hell are you doing in there?" Mark muttered.

Light seeped past the blinds and curtains over the windows. The silhouettes of people danced from room-to-room. They moved tenderly through the house, a lover chasing a lover. There wasn't a sense of danger or reluctance. Alcohol played a role in the current state of the affair, but they weren't inebriated. They knew what they were doing.

Rebecca knew what she was doing.

Mark said, "You'll fuck him tonight. You've done it before, haven't you?" He struck the steering wheel with his palms and shook his head, tears dripping onto his vomit-stained clothing. He said, "It can't be the first time. It's *never* the first time. If you cheated once, you–you–you've cheated twice. That's how it works. You're doing it! You're fucking him, aren't you?! You damn whore! Goddamn you! God–"

He stopped himself upon remembering his location. Nick's home, rented by his parents, was located in a cozy middle-class neighborhood. If any of his neighbors witnessed Mark's outburst, they wouldn't hesitate to call the police. His appearance—*the vomit*—didn't help his case, either. He took several deep breaths to calm himself.

He whispered, "I'm just wasting my time. If I want to know the truth, I have to find it myself. I can't be a coward anymore. Rebecca… please prove me wrong."

He exited the vehicle, closing the door behind him quietly. Crouched down, he vaulted over the short chain-link fence and ran across the front lawn. He reached a wooden gate at the side of the house. He reached over the barrier and, with the pull of a lever, he unlocked the gate. He took a glance over his shoulder—*no one in sight*—then he squeezed past the gate.

He found himself in a narrow space, a brick wall to his left and Nick's house to the right. He crouched and slunk along the side of the home. He peeked through the windows.

Through the first set, he could see into the living room. The television was on, playing a rerun of AMC's *The Walking Dead*. Pairs of loafers and high heels lay near the front door, removed in a romantic rush. The kitchen was visible through an archway. On the stove, the kettle coughed up clouds of white mist. The water was boiling.

"She's here for hot coffee," Mark whispered, disappointment laced in his voice.

Nick ran into the kitchen, shirtless and barefoot. He turned off the stove, then he dashed away. He was excited, like a teenager on the cusp of losing his virginity.

Shaking with rage and sadness, Mark said, "No, no, no. Where are you going? What are you doing?"

He slunk down the narrow passageway, peeking through every window in his path. *A home office?* He wondered why a privileged, unemployed college graduate needed an office. *The bathroom?* It was empty and clean—*spotless*, in fact. He stopped at the last set of windows on that side of the house. He looked into a master bedroom.

There was a queen-sized bed directly under the window, the headboard protruding over the windowsill. A television and an Xbox One X sat on the dresser, along with stacks of Blu-rays, DVDs, and video games. The closet door was open, revealing a small walk-in closet filled with clothing of all types. A tall, clean cheval mirror stood beside the bedroom door.

From the outside looking in, Nick resembled a wealthy, self-centered, conceited douchebag. Nick loved himself and he loved women, but he wasn't evil. He was just young and naïve.

Mark let out a shuddery sigh as he stared down at the bed under the window. Rebecca lay on that bed, fumbling around as she tried to remove her pantyhose. The alcohol took a toll on her, but she remained conscious and attentive. Nick slid to a stop in the doorway. He grinned as he watched Rebecca's hopeless motions. Rebecca giggled and blushed, embarrassed but excited.

"Help me!" she shouted, laughing.

Nick responded, but Mark couldn’t hear him. He could only sit and watch the show from outside, as if he were part of an audience at a movie theater. However, he *did* have the ability to break the fourth wall—the window—and interfere. He didn’t have the courage to do so, though. It wasn’t part of his plan, either.

Lips trembling, he stuttered, “I–I was just su–supposed to find the… the truth. I–I can’t… I can’t break in there and stop this. I can walk away, but… No, I can’t do that, either. I need to know. I *need* to see this. Rebecca, only you can stop this now. You can save us. Please, don’t make me go through with this. I still love you. You can’t hear me, but I know you can feel it. Stop it. Please stop it.”

Nick crawled onto the bed. He ran his hands up Rebecca’s thighs, then he hooked his fingers under her pantyhose. As he pulled her pantyhose down, slowly and sensually, he kissed her thighs, knees, and shins. Then, after he removed her pantyhose, he kissed her French pedicured toes. He ran his tongue across her soles, as if he were licking an envelope.

Rebecca giggled again, then she moaned. No one ever kissed her feet and lapped at her toes like a dog drinking water before, but it aroused her.

Nick moved up, kissing her from her ankles to her thighs. He gazed into her eyes and smirked, as if to say: *are we really doing this?* Rebecca smiled and nodded, then she closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Nick buried his face in her lap. He flicked his tongue at her crotch, spreading her labia and licking her clitoris. He even penetrated her vagina with his tongue. He slurped and he gulped, savoring the flavor.

Rebecca gripped the bedsheets and jerked every which way on the bed. Broken moans escaped her lips, her breathing became erratic, and her toes curled.

Out of breath, she said, “Wait, wait. Let me… Let me suck your dick.”

“Yeah?” Nick said, grinning. “You sure?”

“I’m sure. Give me your dick, hurry.”

They switched positions. Nick lay on his back, his head propped up on a pillow. Rebecca moved to the foot of the bed, standing on all fours. She arched her back, leaving her ass up in the air. She licked Nick’s penis from the glans to the base. She licked circles on his scrotum. Then, as she moved back up to the head, she sucked his semi-erect penis into her mouth. Within seconds, he was fully erect. She could feel his pulse against her tongue. Her

jaw felt tired after the first minute, so she slowed down, but Nick still felt nothing but pleasure.

She slid her palms against his thighs, then she touched his muscular abs with her fingertips. She looked into his eyes and smiled with his cock in her mouth, as if to say: *we're really doing this.*

Sniffling, Mark covered his mouth with both hands and rocked back and forth. Tears fell from his jaw and mucus hung from his nose. Like opening Pandora's box, a whirlpool of powerful emotions escaped his heart as it shattered: *anger, sadness, fear, disgust, shame, envy, love.* He couldn't stop himself from trembling. He felt a hole in his chest, he felt like his heart was stolen.

Yet, at the same time, he felt his rapid heartbeat across each limb. He even felt it in his crotch. He was jealous of Nick, he despised Rebecca for her cheating, but he was aroused by it.

Mouth overflowing with saliva, he mumbled, "You–You never… gave… gave me a blow–blowjob like that. N–Never… Why not? Why not, you bitch?"

He watched as Rebecca continued performing fellatio on Nick. She fit as much of his cock as possible into her mouth. She spit on it, she stroked it, she even played with his testicles. Her taste buds tingled with excitement as she tasted his pre-ejaculate. It felt intimate, it felt like love to her. She enjoyed every second of it.

Fingers trembling uncontrollably, Mark unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants. He pulled his jeans and underwear down, causing his erect penis to flop out. He narrowed his eyes, as if that would help him examine his penis through the darkness. It was five inches long, and as thin as his index and middle fingers put together. His foreskin was unusually tight, but he didn't notice anything wrong about it.

His adult phimosis had gone undiagnosed throughout his entire lifetime due to his lack of experience. Rebecca didn't know how to tell him about it. *'Your foreskin is supposed to retract.'*

As his tears landed on his penis, Mark whispered, "It's not fair. You never sucked me like… like *that.* You never fucked me with the lights on. Am I a monster? Were you ashamed of me? Did I scare you?"

He watched as Rebecca straddled Nick's lap. She moved her hips back and forth, rubbing his thick penis between her labia. A *squishy* sound

accompanied each thrust. She was sopping wet. Then, Nick's penis slipped into her. The first penetration was always the best. Her breathing intensified as she rode him, bouncing on his cock in the cowgirl position.

Mark could hear her moans of pleasure through the window. He looked down at himself and gasped. He masturbated subconsciously, using his tears as lubricant. Even after he realized it, he continued to masturbate. He felt as if something else—some unearthly, incorporeal force—had taken control of his right arm.

"Oh God, oh no," he muttered.

Before he could stop, his limbs locked up, his ass clenched, and a surge of ecstasy shot through his body. Jets of semen spurted out of his penis and landed on the shrub under the window. Weak-kneed, he staggered away from the window and leaned back against the brick wall behind him—but he didn't stop stroking his erect penis. He trembled with anger, his grip tightening around his thin dick.

He muttered, "You idiot, you pussy, *you cuck*… That's what you are, Mark, a damn cuck. He's in there fuckin' your girl and you're out here jacking off to it." He gritted his teeth and clenched his eyes shut. Face as red as an apple, he hissed, "You don't deserve her. You don't even deserve to have a dick. You cuck, *you snowflake cuck.*"

He pulled his keys out of his pocket. He didn't notice the *clinking* and *clacking* of the keys. He was solely focused on his self-punishment. He pressed the tip of the key against his foreskin, then he dragged it across the base. The key left a red mark on his penis—but that wasn't enough. He pressed the tip of the key against his foreskin again, then he began *sawing* into his penis.

Up-and-down, the cuts of the key tore into his erect penis. He felt a twinge as the key *ripped* through his foreskin and scraped his glans. Due to his lifelong phimosis, it was the first time he ever made contact with his glans. And it was excruciatingly painful. The twinge from the head of his penis reverberated through his entire body.

The hairs on his arms prickled, he felt a tingling sensation throughout his crotch, and his lungs were vacuumed with a loud gasp. Tears flew out of his eyes with each blink, like water from a sprinkler.

Yet, he kept on sawing into his penis. Blood dripped from the opening of his tight foreskin, like urine after taking a piss. As a matter of fact, warm

blood covered *most* of his mutilated genitals. His penis finally became flaccid. He chuckled as he continued to stroke himself. He used his own tears and blood as lubricant. He found it funny, despite the pain.

"Oh shit," he muttered, wide-eyed.

He saw Nick standing from the bed, eyes narrowed and brow raised. He shoved his penis into his pants and ran down the passageway. He returned to his car, covered in tears, saliva, vomit, and blood. To his utter relief, he escaped the neighborhood before anyone could walk out of Nick's house. He was safe, and he was ready to continue with his plans.

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Chapter Five

The Interview

"So, um… about the money," Tyler Ellis asked, his timorous voice drowned out by the surrounding chatter at the bar. "You brought the money, right?"

"Excuse me?" Mark responded. Sitting on a creaky stool, he leaned closer to Tyler and said, "You're going to have to speak up, man."

Tyler looked to his right. Elbow-to-elbow, patrons of all ages filled the bar, drinking beer and ordering cocktails, chatting about movies and discussing politics, and even flirting with each other. The bar, known as *The Cellar,* welcomed people from all walks of life. There wasn't a dress code, there weren't any uptight rules. The lounge was dimly-lit, but the atmosphere was cool and lighthearted.

Mark knocked on the bar and said, "Don't worry about them. If I've learned anything in life, it's that most people don't care about you—*about us.* Before I got a girlfriend, I used to worry about eating dinner or going to a movie by myself. I thought: *people are going to stare, they're going to laugh, they're going to bully me.* Even as a grown man, those thoughts stayed on my mind. In reality, I realized that… no one cared, no one ever noticed. It was all in my head. Our anxiety and… and society do that to us."

He smiled and shrugged. *Why am I rambling to this kid?*–he asked himself as he examined his guest of honor. Tyler was a twenty-one-year-old college student. His scrawny physique couldn't intimidate a girl in kindergarten. His clean-shaved face and defined jawline complemented his Caesar haircut, which looked like it was dyed blonde. He wore a loose, striped long-sleeve shirt, jeans, and brown boots. His face twitched as he tapped his feet on the floorboards. He was blatantly nervous.

Mark patted Tyler's shoulder and said, "They won't pay attention to us unless we make a scene, so try to relax. It's just an interview."

"I know, but I just… I don't really like talking about this in public. I just need the cash. Can't we just, you know, do this over Skype or something?"

"No, that won't work. I need to hear it from *your* mouth and *in* person. It's part of the… experience, you know?"

“I don’t know about this. I need privacy. Okay?”

Mark turned away, staring blankly at a crowd of college students. A big, oafish grin contorted his face, but he quickly fought it off. He invited Tyler to the bar because he wanted to gain his trust in a public space. Afterward, he hoped to convince him to move their chat to another location. But, to his utter delight, Tyler was already willing to move to a discreet place.

His meticulously-crafted plan was going better than he had expected.

Mark looked back at Tyler and said, “I understand your concerns. I get it, man. Why don’t we take a walk? There’s a park nearby. It’s not the best area to walk around right now, but there’s two of us, so I think we’ll be fine. Besides, if we’re walking and talking, we both win. I get the experience, you get some mobile privacy, and we all go home happy. Sound good?”

Tyler bit the tip of his tongue between his incisor teeth. He stared at his mug of beer, which he didn’t drink, then he glanced over at the other patrons. No one paid any attention to him or Mark.

He asked, “Can you pay me first? It’s not that I don’t trust you, okay? It’s just… I’d feel more comfortable if I knew that you–”

“No problem,” Mark interrupted, eager to leave.

He pulled his wallet out and thumbed through his cash—*hundreds* of dollars. If anything went wrong, he was willing to pay people off. Money ruled the world, money contaminated human consciences. He handed Tyler a hundred dollars in five twenty-dollar bills. Tyler reluctantly accepted the cash. He felt like he just completed a transaction with a drug dealer.

Tyler said, “Let’s get out of here before anyone sees us.”

“Yeah, sure. Follow me.”

Mark and Tyler made their way to a park in the seedy neighborhood. Except for a few thugs and homeless people, the area was desolate. Most of the streetlamps were broken or off, too. Trash littered the streets, broken windows burdened the homes, and police stayed away from the neighborhood. The remaining residents were abandoned by their city, but they continued their fight for survival and happiness.

The park didn’t fare much better than the surrounding buildings. The grass was dead—yellow, dried, *drenched* in urine. Dozens of tents covered the lawns, occupied by homeless men and women. Some children, immigrants from another country, even wandered the makeshift homeless

encampment. The poverty and pain seemed normal to them—*to everyone*. Shantytowns had evolved into cities of tents.

Strolling down a walkway, illuminated solely by the stars and moon, Mark said, “Like I said on the phone, I’m looking to interview people with STDs. It’s for a project I’ve been–”

“Hep–Hepatitis isn’t a–an STD,” Tyler interrupted, fumbling over his words. “It can, um, spread like anything else. You know, sharing razors and needles and stuff like that.”

“But you contracted it through sex, didn’t you? I know it also spreads through semen, blood, and ‘other’ bodily fluids.”

Tyler swallowed the lump in his throat and looked forward. He couldn’t deny Mark’s claim.

Mark said, “Tell me about it.”

“About what?”

“About your STD.”

Tyler smiled nervously, then he asked, “Where should I start?”

“You can start anywhere. I just… I want to know about the virus.”

Tyler looked up at the sky, a single tear rolling down his cheek. He was ashamed of his sexually-transmitted disease. He hadn’t even told his parents about it. He kept it a secret because he knew he would be stigmatized by society if he revealed it to anyone.

He said, “I might have chronic Hepatitis-B. I have to… to see a doctor every few months. I haven’t really been given any treatment options yet, so it’s still there. It’s still… *lingering* inside me. It could stay with me for the rest of my life. You know, it’s very embarrassing to have to tell people about it. I have to tell them to get tested and vaccinated, like if I’m some sort of monster.”

“Does it hurt?”

“It breaks my heart. I can’t stop thinking about it. My mom… I’m barely in my twenties, what will my mom think about it? Or my dad? Or my brother? Hey, this… this is going to be anonymous, right?”

Ignoring his question, Mark said, “I wasn’t talking about your emotions. I meant: does your hepatitis cause you any physical pain?”

Tyler shrugged as he wiped the tears and snot off his face. He said, “Yeah. It hurts my stomach. Well, it’s my, um, abdominal area. Right here,

right behind my ribs. Sometimes, it feels like something's going to explode in there. It sucks."

"Pain and discomfort," Mark said. He looked away and gazed at one of the tents off in the distance. Under his breath, he whispered, "Perfect."

Tyler rambled about the virus, the stigma associated with sexually-transmitted diseases, and his fear of the future. Mark heard his voice, but he didn't listen to his short speech. He stopped under a broken lamppost. Tyler stopped a few feet away from him, confused by his behavior. He looked at Mark, then he looked around. There was nothing special about their stop. It was dark and desolate.

Tyler asked, "What's wrong?"

"You don't have a lot of money, do you, Tyler?" Mark asked.

"Wha–What?"

"I mean, you accepted my offer because you *needed* this money, right? You're unemployed, aren't you?"

"Yeah. That's, um… That's right. Why does that matter?"

Again, Mark glanced around the area. The walkways and trails across the park were empty. Residents didn't wander that area at night. Homeless people slept in tents and sleeping bags on the lawns. He could hear some of their voices from afar. Some of them appeared to be screaming at each other, arguing about shelter, food, and *nothing.* Yet, their voices were barely noticeable due to the distance. The darkness shielded them from any prying eyes, too.

Mark bit his bottom lip and stared into Tyler's eyes. Tyler sensed something was wrong. He noticed a twinkle of sadness in Mark's eyes. A wave of tension suddenly smothered them.

Mark said, "I want to make a deal with you. I'll give you *more* money for something of yours. I'll even add a little more to… this might sound 'menacing,' but I'll add more cash on the side to buy your silence. I want this to be a quiet transaction. Nothing more, nothing less."

Tyler furrowed his brow and cocked his head to the side. He couldn't understand the peculiar request. To him, it sounded like Mark wanted to pay him for sex.

He took a step back and stuttered, "I–I'm not a–a prostitute, man. I don't know what you–"

"I'm not asking you for sex."

“Then what the hell do you want from me?”

Mark sighed, then he said, “I want to make your life easier. I want to pay you for something much easier and *safer* than sex with a stranger. Okay? I just want to make sure that you’re open-minded before I continue. I don’t want you to be freaked out or anything like that. It’s a strange offer, I know that, but… you need the money, don’t you? A few extra hundreds would make life easier for you now, right?”

Tyler glanced over his shoulder, then he looked back at Mark. He thought about running and yelling for help. He wondered if the homeless people would assist him since he couldn’t rely on the cops. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. His hand shook as he tapped the screen.

Mark said, “Don’t bother calling 911, Tyler. You know you don’t want to do that. You’ll have to explain to them what we were doing out here and, at the end of the day, they won’t find anything against me. I’m not doing anything wrong. But they *will* find out about your hepatitis. And it just might end up on the news. It won’t be a big story, but it’ll be enough for your mom to find out. Right?”

Teary-eyed, Tyler stopped tapping his phone before he could call anyone. He looked over at Mark, eyes shining like those on a punished puppy.

He asked, “What do you want from me? Get to the point before I start screaming.”

Mark stepped forward and said, “I’ll give you four hundred… No, I’ll pay you *five* hundred dollars for a syringe of your blood. Just one syringe. I’ll extract it very carefully and professionally. And I’ll give you another four hundred dollars for your silence. You’d be making one-thousand dollars in one night. That’s your rent and food for a month, isn’t it? How does that sound?”

Tyler shook his head in disbelief. He met a man online and agreed to meet him for an interview. He never thought that man would ask him for a syringe of his blood. Questions flooded the crevices of his mind: *what does he need my blood for? Is it even legal to do something like this? Is he an undercover cop? Or am I in danger? Can he really pay me for my blood?*

He could only utter one word: “Why?”

Mark responded, “I could give you a million reasons. I’m a bug chaser. Instead of real insects, I’m collecting viruses. Strange, right? Or maybe I’m a doctor trying to find a cure to all of these STDs spreading through society.

Too noble, I guess. I might be a vampire...” He smirked and said, “At the end of the day, I’m realizing that it doesn’t really matter. I’m giving you a lot of money for this. Don’t throw it away for nothing. So, what do you say? We have a deal?”

The men stood in silence for a minute, staring at each other like long lost lovers meeting for the first time in years.

“No,” Tyler said.

The stupid, cocky smirk was wiped off Mark’s face in an instant.

He stuttered, “Wha–What?”

“Whatever you’re planning, I don’t want any part of it. This is… This is some fucked up shit, man. I’m not selling my blood. No fucking way.”

Tyler walked away from the broken lamppost, huffing and muttering.

Mark grabbed his arm and said, “Wait a minute. Please wait. This isn’t what–”

“Don’t touch me!” Tyler yelled as he jerked away from Mark’s grip. He jabbed his finger at Mark’s chest and said, “If you touch me again, I’ll… I’ll scream, I’ll run, and I’ll call the cops. You’re a fucking psycho. Leave me alone.”

“Tyler, please don’t leave like this. I *really* need your blood. It’s for personal use only, I swear. I’ll give you more money, I’ll beg, I’ll do anything. Don’t leave me like this.”

Tyler walked away, faster than before. His eyelids, nose, and lips twitched as anxiety and adrenaline overwhelmed his body. He felt a contradicting sense of bravery and fear. He was proud because he stood up for himself, but he feared Mark’s reaction. He thought: *he knows my name, what if he tracks down my family and tells them about my problem? What if–*

He didn’t have the opportunity to finish that thought. A loud *thud* echoed through the park, then he collapsed on the walkway.

Mark stood behind him, holding a heavy, jagged-edged stone in both of his shaking hands. Blood dripped from the side of the stone, the red drops *plopping* on the walkway—*one*-by-*one*. Tyler snorted and coughed as his legs shook. He looked as if he had lost control of his body. His eyes appeared to be rolling back, but he remained conscious.

“I’m sorry,” Mark said, his voice strained and raspy as he fought the urge to cry. “I’m *so* sorry. I didn’t want to… to hurt you.”

“H–Help,” Tyler croaked out. “Hel–Help me. Some… Somebody, help…”

“Stop it. Don’t make another sound. I’ll call an ambulance when–”

“Please help me.”

“Don’t make this harder for me—*for you.* Stop it.”

Tyler wormed his way forward a few inches, gaining some control of his body. He lifted his face from the concrete and stared at the tents in the distance.

He yelled, “Help! He’s–”

Thud! Mark swung the stone down at the back of Tyler’s head again. In turn, Tyler’s face hit the pavement with full force. A gash stretched from his hairline to his glabella. His nose shattered, blood gushing out of his nostrils. One of his upper incisor teeth was chipped. Blood bubbled out of the massive cut on the back of his head, turning his blonde hair red.

Mark looked at the stone in disbelief. His wide, bulging eyes said something along the lines of: *I didn’t do that, did I?*

Before Mark could toss the rock aside, Tyler lifted his head from the pavement. He rolled onto his back and stared up at Mark. By then, a cold sweat had drenched his body from head-to-toe. Blood covered *at least* fifty percent of his head, the red rivers running every which way. His lips moved, but he couldn’t say a word. Only a croak escaped his throat.

Mark cried, “I’m sorry.”

He swung the rock down with all of his might. The rock struck the side of Tyler’s head with a wet, squishy *thud* and a hair-raising *crack*. The top-right side of his skull gave way, pushed *into* his head. The impact left a massive crater on his scalp. His eye socket collapsed, forcing his bloodshot eye out of his skull. His eye was crushed, bloody vitreous oozing out of its lacerations.

Tyler’s limbs shook violently for fifteen seconds. During those slow, dreadful seconds, blood sputtered from his mouth. His crushed nostrils flared as he tried to breathe, but he couldn’t draw a satisfying breath. His mushy nostrils flapped like the wings of a bird. He stared up at the night sky with his only good eye. Then his eye rolled to the back of his head as he painfully passed away.

Mark dropped the stone in the grass. He stared down at his hands and coat. He was covered in blood—*HBV-infected blood.* He even felt it on his

neck and jaw. He spit and coughed, but he didn't dare lick his lips or touch his face. He pulled a small case out of his coat pocket. It looked like a case for eyeglasses, but it held a hypodermic syringe.

He looked around as he knelt down beside Tyler's dead body. Two homeless men walked across the lawn some fifty meters away, but they didn't notice the crime scene.

Mark penetrated the basilic vein on Tyler's right arm with the needle. He filled the syringe with his infected blood, placed a cap on the needle, and then he carefully returned it to the case.

"It–It's done," he stuttered. "I–I didn't want to… to do it this way, but you left me no choice. I need this blood. I'm sorry, kid."

He dragged the dead body across the lawn, away from the tents but still in the park. He rolled his body under a row of leafless shrubs. He looked back at the walkway. The trail of blood looked black in the moonlight. He didn't have the time or the tools to clean up the mess. He was worried, he never planned on harming Tyler, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He figured it would take at least a few hours or even a day before the body would be discovered. And, if the discovery were made by a transient, it would take even longer for the police to get involved. As he looked at the tents, he thought: *maybe you'll even 'tamper' with the evidence, right? Everything will be okay, right?*

As he jogged away from the scene of the crime, Mark muttered, "God, it all went wrong. I hope I don't get sick already. I'm not ready. Not yet. Goddammit."

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Chapter Six

Date Night

“You look stunning tonight, babe,” Mark said, a nervous smile stretching across his face.

Rebecca sat across from him, wearing a teal-blue long-sleeve cocktail dress and matching heels. She was dressed for a date, but she didn’t look comfortable. Her eyes looked heavy and dull—sleepy, *lifeless*. She played with her leftover pasta, twisting and turning her fork like a video game with motion controls. A glass of Coca Cola stood next to her plate. She wasn’t in the mood for alcohol.

She looked at Mark. She could see he was really trying to impress her, but she just couldn’t find that spark. Yet, she still managed to respond with a smile and a nod: *thank you for the compliment.*

“Well, to me, you *always* look stunning,” Mark said with a smirk. Rebecca stayed quiet. Mark glanced around the restaurant and said, “I know we’ve never eaten here before, but I thought you’d like it. *Like Home Restaurant…* The food really tastes like it was homecooked, right? I thought it was delicious. I’d, um… I’d like to come back here with you sometime. What do you think? You like the place?”

Rebecca said, “It’s not bad.”

It’s not bad? That’s it?–Mark thought. He remembered Rebecca’s date with Nick at that very same restaurant. She was all smiles and giggles then. The difference in her attitude was jarring.

Mark cleaned his lips with a napkin, he folded it, then he dabbed the sweat off his brow. He felt like his button-up shirt and dress pants were shrinking, tightening around him like a boa constrictor. Like a traumatized war veteran, he suffered from flashbacks. He never saw combat, though—not *real* combat. He saw flashbacks of his painfully awkward first date, which involved plenty of dead silence, sweat, and embarrassment.

He killed a young man—crushed his head with a large stone—but that didn’t faze him. It wasn’t even on his mind. He only wanted to win Rebecca’s heart again, even if he went to prison afterward.

He said, “Hey, do you, uh… do you remember when we first started dating? It was different, right?”

Rebecca stopped playing with her food. Without moving her head, she raised her eyes and looked at her boyfriend. She thought: *oh God, he finally noticed, he’s finally going to break up with me.*

“What’s different?” Rebecca asked.

“Us.”

“What do you mean? Like, in a bad way or something?”

“No. Well, I don’t know. I mean… it feels like our roles have changed. I’m sitting here blabbering on and on while you sit there and barely say a word. I used to be the shy one, you were the outgoing one. You brought me out of my shell after we met and… and I guess you withdrew back into yours. Why aren’t you so outgoing now?”

Rebecca wanted to say: *because I’m not in love with you anymore.* But she was a coward. She wanted *him* to break up with her. She thought it would lessen the pain for both of them after the inevitable end of their relationship. She didn’t realize that she was extending their heartbreak—dragging their hearts across trails of broken glass.

She shook her head, sniffled, and said, “I don’t know what to say, Mark. I’m a little sleepy, you know I’ve been working long shifts recently, but at the end of the day, I’m the same ol’ girl.”

“Yeah, I guess that could be it. You need a vacation, baby. We need to spend more time together, don’t we?”

Rebecca could only nod as her eyes wandered back to her food. The thought of spending more time with Mark depressed her. But she couldn’t rip off the Band-Aid. Mark kept thinking about her last words: *I’m the same ol’ girl.* He couldn’t help but wonder if she had been cheating on him since the beginning of their relationship.

He smiled and shrugged, as if to say: *yeah, everything’s fine.* He didn’t want to cause a scene and arouse any suspicion. Yet, he couldn’t give up on her. He was a hopeless romantic. He moved his feet towards Rebecca, his cheap dress shoes gliding across the spotless floorboards effortlessly. Then, he kicked her.

He wasn’t *trying* to hurt her—he only wanted to play a game of footsies with her, just like Nick—but he was clumsy. The tip of his shoe hit her shin with a *thud.* It sounded as if he had hit her directly on the bone.

Ow!—Rebecca yelped. She glared at Mark, her eyes practically sticking out of her head.

She asked, “What’d you do that for?”

“I–I was–wasn’t trying to, um… I didn’t mean to ki–kick you,” Mark stuttered.

“Okay, so then why did you kick me?”

“I don’t know. I just thought it would be romantic?”

“*What?*” Rebecca asked loudly.

Mark shook his head and looked down at his macaroni and cheese. He heard the sound of Rebecca’s fork hitting the plate—*clink!* She was easily irritated by Mark. Her reaction confirmed his suspicions: *their love was gone*. He knew she wouldn’t have reacted that way with Nick. He was angry, he gritted his teeth and took a deep breath, but he stopped himself from clenching his fists.

No witnesses, he thought, *everyone has to forget me.*

Without looking at his girlfriend, he said, “I’m sorry. You ready to get out of here?”

***

Mark pushed the front door open, then he flicked a light-switch between the door frame and window. The lightbulb flickered for a few seconds, then it lit up the apartment with a steady, yellow glow.

The studio apartment was cramped. To the left, there was a desk with a computer and monitor on top. Crumpled napkins and torn sheets of paper covered the table. Beside the desk, there was a nightstand and a double bed. The bed wasn’t made. Across from the foot of the bed, a door led to the small bathroom—which was also dirty.

To the right, there was a small kitchen space with a table for two. A pile of dirty dishes sat in the sink. There were some dirty socks, boxers, and shirts on the floor, too.

As she entered the apartment, Rebecca said, “I see you haven’t been cleaning. What’s up? Are you, um… Are you…”

Mark closed and locked the door behind him. He took off his belt and shoes, he unbuttoned his shirt, and then he sat on the bed.

He asked, “Am I what?”

Depressed—Rebecca couldn’t say that word. If he was depressed, she didn’t want to aggravate him by asking. Like most people, she didn’t know

how to deal with depression. It was a mystery, like an incurable cancer.

With her arms crossed, she asked, “How are you?”

Mark chuckled, then he said, “That’s a strange question to ask now, isn’t it? I mean, couldn’t you ask me that during dinner? That seems more appropriate.”

“I’m not trying to be appropriate. I just want to know how you’re feeling, Mark. Are you okay? Is everything good?”

Mark looked around his apartment with a set of narrowed eyes, as if he didn’t recognize his own home—as if he had accidentally walked into the wrong apartment. His apartment was small and dirty, and it was located in a ‘bad’ neighborhood. His living conditions were worse than Rebecca’s, although she also lived modestly.

He admitted defeat. He felt like he couldn’t compete with Nick. He felt uglier than him, he lacked charisma and confidence, and he wasn’t wealthy. He figured Rebecca would never move into his apartment. He tried everything to impress her that night, but he failed. *I have one more option*, he thought, *one more chance.*

He beckoned to her and said, “Come here. Sit down with me.”

Rebecca took one step before she stopped. She spotted a cockroach skittering across the headboard. She shuddered, drew a deep breath, then she moved forward. She sat down beside Mark.

She asked, “What’s on your mind?”

Mark rubbed her shoulder gently with one hand and he touched her thigh with the other. He leaned closer to her, his eyes stuck on hers. He felt her breath and she felt his. For a moment, the rest of the apartment vanished—the desk, the trash, the kitchen. Only the bed remained, the mattress as soft and fluffy as cotton candy. They found themselves in a moment of normality.

Mark kissed her. Rebecca did not resist. His lips interlocked with hers, Mark caressed her neck with his fingertips. Rebecca closed her eyes and let out a soft moan. She grabbed his upper arm and squeezed his bulging muscles. The same reminder rang through her head: *he’s not Nick, don’t say Nick, he’s not Nick.* Mark grabbed her breasts over her dress. He hissed in pain as his mutilated penis became erect.

Keeping her eyes closed, Rebecca asked, “You okay?”

Mark ignored her. As a matter of fact, he didn't even hear her voice. He kissed her neck as he gripped her breast as tightly as possible. He pushed her back onto the bed while sliding his other hand up her dress. He scratched her panties at the crotch, trying to tear through her pantyhose with his fingernails. He licked and sucked on her neck as he squeezed her breast again.

Rebecca grabbed his arm and said, "Hold on. We… Slow down a little, Mark."

Amidst the slurping and moaning, Mark swore he heard a different name. *She said 'Nick,' didn't she?*–he thought. He couldn't stop images of Nick from flashing in his mind. And those images couldn't stop his penis from growing thicker and longer. He flinched and hissed in pain again.

"Stop it," Rebecca said. "Hey, I said stop it. Mark, calm down. You… You act like you've never done this before."

Mark tore her pantyhose at the crotch. He rubbed her underwear with the tip of his finger. To his dismay, she wasn't very moist. He pushed his finger upward, trying to penetrate her through her underwear. While doing so, he bit her neck. The bite was soft, so his teeth wouldn't break her skin, but it was just hard enough to worry Rebecca.

She pushed him away, crawled out from under him, and shouted, "Get off of me!"

Mark fell to his ass between his desk and rolling chair. He watched as Rebecca sat up and adjusted her dress and pantyhose. She was flustered, scowling and huffing and muttering. She wanted to say more to him. *Get off of me*—that didn't convey her true feelings. She wanted to say: *get off of me, you dirty fuckin' freak!* Even then, it still wasn't enough.

I don't love you anymore.

I don't love you anymore.

I don't love you anymore!

Rebecca stood up and said, "I don't know what's gotten into you, but you're not acting right. You're acting like some crazy pervert or rapist. I don't… I don't feel safe here. Not with you…"

"I–I'm sorry. I just… I don't know what happened, Rebecca. I lost control of myself. I just wanted you so badly. I didn't think I was out of line. I mean… we're a couple, aren't we?"

Rebecca stared down at Mark. *Now's your chance, break up with him, end it before it goes too far,* she told herself. She clenched her jaw as tears glistened in her eyes. She saw a desperate, depressed man in that apartment—a man she once loved unconditionally. She couldn't hurt him during his time of need, but she couldn't help him, either.

So, she walked away.

As she opened the front door, Mark jumped up to his feet and asked, "*Is it over?*" Rebecca stopped in the doorway, a cool breeze caressing the tears on her cheeks. Mark asked, "Is this how it ends?"

There was a moment of silence—a minute that felt like an hour.

Without looking back, Rebecca asked, "Why are you asking me that? I never said anything like that. So, um… What's on your mind? Do you want to break up?"

Rebecca hoped for a resounding 'yes.' She prayed for a mutual separation—a peaceful, understanding end to their love and a new beginning for their friendship. If not, she knew the breakup would be painful for both of them. To her utter disappointment, Mark didn't say a word. He left her the burden.

She sighed, then she said, "I need time to myself, Mark. I need fresh air and… and stuff like that. I want to go home now, so I'm going home. I'll call an Uber. You just stay here and… just stay here."

Rebecca walked out of the apartment and closed the door behind her. Mark watched her until she disappeared beyond the edge of the window. He sat on the corner of his bed and stared at the front door for ten uninterrupted minutes. Then, he rolled into the fetal position and cried the night away.

His voice breaking, he said, "It's over. It's really over."

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Chapter Seven

Two-For-One Special

Mark stepped on the brake pedal. The hatchback rolled to a stop beside a dumpster in an alley. Next to the dumpster, a fire burned in a steel trashcan —*snapping* and *popping*. Two homeless women huddled next to the fire, a male transient sat on the floor beside them. The passenger seat window was rolled down.

“I didn’t get your name last time,” Mark said.

The women looked at each other, then they squinted at the car. They whispered amongst themselves: *you know this guy? You got a weapon?*

Mark coughed to clear his throat, then he said, “You remember me, don’t you?” The women continued whispering. Mark smiled and said, “*Blood.* You remember the blood, right?”

A woman lowered the hood of her tattered hoodie, revealing her face in the fire’s illumination—*Dakota Foley.* She ignored her friend’s warnings and approached the vehicle.

She leaned on the passenger door, her elbows on the windowsill. She said, “I remember you, guy. You come back for more? Or did you catch the ‘bug?’ Crazy motherfucker…”

“I’m not here for you or your blood, but I need your help.”

“Well, my help ain’t free.”

“I know.”

Mark pulled a wad of cash out of his pocket—*two hundred dollars.* He shoved the money back into his pocket, then he opened the passenger door.

He said, “Half of the money is for you, the other half will be for your ‘friend.’ Get in?”

“My friend? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Get in and I’ll explain on the way.”

Dakota wasn’t as hesitant as before. She was paid well during their first encounter, she wasn’t harmed by Mark, and the police didn’t show up to arrest her for selling her infected blood. She grabbed her backpack from the floor beside the dumpster. She nodded at her friend, communicating with

the gesture: *I'm going with him.* Then she entered the hatchback without saying another word.

As they drove down the alley, Dakota asked, "Where are we going, hun?"

"You tell me."

"Alright, sure. What are you looking for? What are you buying?"

"Diseases. I'm looking for someone who might have been to a clinic recently. I need gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, herpes, and all that good stuff."

Dakota giggled, then she said, "You really are a sick bastard. Alright, listen up. I know where you can find someone like that. There's this girl over at the camp near the freeway. She's got it all, man."

"The one on the hill?"

"That's the one. We'll have to walk there, but don't worry, I think you'll be good. They don't want any trouble, and you look like a damn psycho anyway. No one's going to fuck with you."

"What's the girl's name?"

Smirking, Dakota asked, "Don't you wanna know mine first?"

Mark glanced over at her as he spun the steering wheel and headed to the closest freeway ramp. He wondered if she was trying to flirt with him.

Dakota said, "Well, you can call me 'Dakota.' Some regulars call me 'Kody.' The girl… I ain't good friends with her, but I've chatted with her. I helped her go to the clinic, you know? Her name's Amber. She's got what you need. I don't know if she'll sell her blood, but I *know* she's got it all. I ain't lying."

"Good. I don't need her blood. I have something different planned for her."

"You're not going to hurt her, are you?"

As the car rolled to a stop at a red light, Mark looked at her and said, "No. I think it'll be the opposite, actually."

***

Mark followed Dakota through an illegal homeless encampment under a freeway. The black plastic bag in his right hand rustled with each step. Dakota looked at the bag, vigilant and curious. She heard tools of some sort *thudding* against each other over the *swishing* of the plastic. He wasn't carrying groceries or clothes for the needy in there.

Mark was fascinated by the homeless encampment. He knew all about it due to California's seemingly *never-ending* homelessness crisis, but he had never been so close to the struggle.

At least four dozen transients occupied the homeless encampment. Tattered tents, some barely standing, covered the area. Some of the tents were even connected to each other via makeshift tunnels made of torn cardboard boxes, tarps, and blankets. They burned trash to create bonfires near their tents, the smoke billowing up to the overpass.

Some of the homeless discussed the day and the weather: *it'll get colder soon, we need to stay warm.* Others spoke to *themselves* about anything that crept into their minds: *them birds*, *we gotta catch them birds before they catch us.* A man pushed a shopping cart—filled with clothes and knickknacks found on the streets—around the tents and played some old hip-hop songs from his radio.

A small group of homeless people gathered around the freeway's ramp. They held cardboard signs that read: *homeless, please help; broke, cold, hungry, anything helps;* and *I'm hungry.*

The homeless community was neglected. Despite their growing presence across the state, the transients were forgotten by most politicians and residents.

"Until the next election, guys," Mark muttered, barely audible. "Maybe someone will actually make a difference next time. Probably not…"

He staggered as a man bumped into him. Before he could apologize, the man growled and lunged at him, then he teetered away.

Rambling incoherently, the man said, "Give me some space, mister. Please give me some space. You think I'm crazy, but I just need some… some room. I like my space, you see? Y'all are trying to steal it, but *nope.* It's mine. So, give me my damn space. Don't look at me and I won't look at y'all." As he wandered away, he muttered, "Trying to steal my space, *my soul*, with your nasty black eyes. Black holes for eyes, black holes for eyes…"

Mark sighed and shook his head. He couldn't help him, so he tried to turn his undivided attention to the task at hand. He jogged forward and continued following Dakota through the encampment. Despite her weak physique, he felt safe around her.

Dakota kicked one of the tents at the end and said, “Amber. Amber, you in there?” She heard a grunt and a groan. She said, “I’m coming in. I brought some business.”

She opened the tent, nearly tearing the opening flap to shreds, then she squeezed herself into it. She sat down in the corner of the tent and covered her legs with part of a blanket.

As she stared at the other occupants—two women in sleeping bags—Dakota said, “She’s here. Come on in.”

Mark knelt down in front of the tent’s entrance. He smelled urine, feces, and cheap beer in the area, but he didn’t gag or retch. He stared at the two women. One of them slept in her sleeping bag. At least, he told himself she was sleeping. The middle-aged, blonde-haired woman barely moved. The other woman, Amber Page, sat up and stared at her uninvited guests—sick and drowsy.

Amber was twenty-five years old. She wore a large black hoodie to bed. She used her dirty jeans as a pillow. Her black hair stuck out in every direction, strands covering her face. Soot covered her nose and cheeks. Pitted acne scars were drilled deep into her face. Blisters surrounded her thin, chapped lips. Her skin looked sickly pale and her eyes looked yellow around her green irises.

Mark nodded at her and asked, “Are you Amber?”

Amber looked at Dakota, then back at Mark. She responded with a nod.

“You went to a clinic recently, right?” Mark asked. “What were you diagnosed with?”

Again, Amber looked at Dakota for a sense of direction. One moment, she was sleeping with a friend, who *might* have been dead already. The next, a mysterious man was asking her strange questions about her visit to the clinic. She decided silence was the best answer. So, she answered his questions with another nod.

Dakota chuckled, then she said, “Come on, Amber. He’s cool. He’s got a little… what do you call ‘em? A business proposition. Yeah, he wants to make a deal with you.”

In a soft voice, Amber asked, “What kind of deal?”

“Don’t ask me. Ask him. Come on, you’re a big girl. You can do it.”

Amber took a deep breath, turned her attention to Mark, and sternly asked, “*What kind of deal?* What is this about? Huh? Are you some sort of

cop? You need me to plant something, lie to someone, do a–”

“I’m not a cop, so you can calm down,” Mark interrupted. “I’m just a man looking for something very specific. So, do me a favor and answer my questions. Okay? Did you go to a clinic recently?”

“Yes.”

“What were you diagnosed with?”

“A whole bunch of shit. What’s it to ya?”

Mark smiled and said, “Amber, you won’t get paid if you don’t cooperate.”

Paid—Amber’s eyes lit up like headlights as soon as she heard that word. She asked, “How much?”

“A hundred.”

“For what?”

Mark responded, “You’ll know as soon as you answer my questions. Now let’s stop wasting time. What were you diagnosed with?”

Amber said, “Well, um… It was a lot of stuff, but mostly the clap and chlamydia.”

“The clap… So, gonorrhea and chlamydia. Okay, alright. I can work with that. So, here’s what we’re going to do.”

Mark opened the plastic bag and looked into it. There were three sex toys in the bag: a purple G-spot vibrator, a set of anal beads, and a magic wand. He pulled the G-spot vibrator out of the bag.

Dakota smirked and said, “Whoa.”

Mark tossed the sex toy onto Amber’s sleeping bag. He said, “Use it to play with yourself. I need you to get *deep* in there, okay? If you can orgasm, go for it. I think it would help.”

Amber asked, “Is this, um… Is this for a porno or something? ‘Cause if it is, I’m gonna need more than a hundred bucks, man. I need, like, royalties or something.”

Mark stared at her with a deadpan expression. Then he leaned back and chuckled. *Royalties,* he thought, *did she just ask me for royalties for porn?* Dakota joined in on the laughter, slapping her knees while swaying from side-to-side. Amber giggled nervously. She didn’t understand what was so funny about her request, but she wanted to fit in.

The other woman didn’t move. She was dead—quiet, cold, and *dead.*

Mark said, “We’re not shooting porn out here. This is for my personal pleasure. And that toy… *that toy* will be part of my personal collection. So, go on. Fuck yourself with it.”

Amber said, “Show me the money.”

Mark pulled the wad of cash out of his pocket. He placed five twenty-dollar bills on the foot of the sleeping bag. He handed the other bills—equaling another hundred dollars—to Dakota.

“Okay, okay,” Amber said, her face flushed like a rose.

She dragged her lower body out of the sleeping bag, revealing her pale, veiny legs. Bruises spread from her ankles to her thighs. She opened her legs wide and exposed her dirty, shit-stained panties. She didn’t bother taking her underwear off. She just pushed her underwear aside. Immediately, a bush of thick, unkempt pubic hair burst out from under her panties.

She rubbed the tip of the toy against her dry pussy, gliding it across the yellow blisters protruding from her genitals. She groaned in pain as she felt a twinge, but she didn’t stop. She forced the vibrator into her vagina, pushing past the painful, fluid-filled cysts. She thrust it in-and-out of her. She masturbated slowly, then she moved faster, and then she slowed down again.

She moaned and she groaned, a mixture of euphoria and agony flowing through her body. Eyes closed, her head began to spin and her body started to jerk. She even thrust her hips, like a dog humping a chew toy. The vibrating tip sent her into a state of ecstasy. For a moment, masturbation took her away from the cold, cruel world she had been forced to accept.

Mark watched her with an impressed look on his face—raised eyebrows, mouth ajar. *She’s done this before for the camera*, he thought. He furrowed his brow as a thick yellow fluid oozed out of her vagina. Then, he saw clouds of blood undulating in the fluid. It didn’t disgust him. Instead, he thought: *I wonder what that tastes like?*

Amber gasped, her muscles tightened, her body shook, and her toes curled. Waves of pleasure rippled through her body. She kept thrusting the toy into her for fifteen more seconds, then she pulled it out—*plop!* She breathed heavily and twitched as she recovered from her orgasm. Blood and other bodily fluids dripped from the tip of the vibrator.

Mark pulled a pair of latex gloves out of his back pocket. He slipped his hands into the gloves, hoping to protect himself from Amber's infectious diseases. Then, he pulled a resealable plastic bag out of his other back pocket. He took the slimy vibrator from Amber's limp hand, holding it with his fingertips and holding his breath—like a scientist in a laboratory carrying a new type of biological weapon.

As he examined the toy, eyes filled with wonder, he said, "Thank you for your services, ladies."

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Chapter Eight

A Getaway

Rebecca stared at her cell phone and read some text messages from Nick. The first message read: *Can't pick you up tonight, babe. Your 'man' is waiting outside. He's not leaving.* The latest message read: *Call me after you ditch him. I wanna have some fun tonight.* The message was followed by a winking emoji and an eggplant emoji.

"I thought Nick usually picked you up on Fridays," a woman said.

Rebecca closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to clear her foggy mind. She looked over at her friend—*Jane Carpenter.* Jane cleaned the bar behind her with a rag, but she could see out the window from afar. A red hatchback was parked in front of *The Green Flamingo.* It was the only car in the parking lot that didn't belong to any of the bar's employees.

Mark sat on the hood of his car, hands tucked into his coat pockets. He shivered and sniffled, blowing steam with each breath. Yet, despite the cold weather, he sat out there and patiently waited for Rebecca.

Rebecca said, "Yeah, but I guess Mark is free tonight."

"So, um… did you tell him about Nick?"

Rebecca smiled nervously and said, "I don't think he'd be here if he knew."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"Soon. Now's not the right time for either of us. It's complicated."

"It always is, isn't it?"

Rebecca waved at Jane, then she walked out of the bar. Her arms crossed, she approached Mark's car. Mark stood up and smiled at her, but Rebecca avoided eye contact. She kept her head down and watched her feet until she reached the car, then she raised her head slightly and stared at Mark's chest. Shame and regret sat on her shoulders—two little devils whispering hurtful words at her self-esteem.

She said, "It's three in the morning, Mark. What are you doing here?"

"What? Aren't you happy to see me?" Mark responded, grinning.

“I thought you worked early on the weekends. You get some time off or something?”

“I did.”

Rebecca glared at him and asked, “*Why?*”

They stood in silence for some thirty seconds, a cold breeze *whooshing* around them. Rebecca was angry at herself, but she didn’t know how to *punish* herself. So, she took out her anger on Mark. Mark wasn’t surprised by her attitude. He sensed the annoyance in her voice. He knew she didn’t want to see him out there.

Rebecca asked, “Why didn’t you call before showing up?”

“Why do I have to call to see my girlfriend? You don’t have a car, right? You usually get a ride from Jane or call an Uber, don’t you? Well, now you don’t have to do that. I’m here. What’s the big deal?”

Go ahead, tell me about Nick, Mark told himself, *come on, Rebecca, hit me with your best shot and I might change our plans.* Rebecca took a step back and looked away. She clenched her fists and breathed deeply. Another opportunity landed on her lap, but she couldn’t end their relationship. In her head, she screamed at herself: *what are you doing?! Why are you making this so difficult?!*

The heart worked in mysterious ways.

Mark said, “I’m not here to argue with you. I know we had a ‘rough’ time last week, so I’m here to make things right. I made some stupid decisions and I’m sorry. Give me a chance to fix this.”

Rebecca looked him in the eye, but she couldn’t read him like before. His eyes were still dim with sadness and hopelessness, but he looked like a new man.

“I got some time off, but I didn’t tell you because, well, I wanted to surprise you,” Mark continued. “I have a special gift for you. I made some ‘romantic’ plans. Will you come with me? Please?”

Mark’s sentences were expertly scripted to create a sense of sincerity while only telling half of the truth. He wanted to surprise Rebecca, but he also didn’t want to call or text her because he knew his communications could be tracked. He had gifts for her, but they weren’t traditional, store-bought presents. And people had their own ideas when it came to ‘romance.’

But it all sounded honest to Rebecca. It made sense to her, too. They had a little fight, so Mark wanted to fix things—*reasonable,* sure. She didn't enjoy seeing him in pain, either, so she couldn't reject him.

One more weekend, she told herself, *then I'll end it for good.*

She nodded at him and said, "Okay, let's go. I'm freezing my butt off out here."

Mark smiled and said, "Perfect. Hop in, baby. Let's get out of here."

***

Marilyn Manson's cover of Johnny Mandel's *Suicide is Painless* played through the speakers. Rebecca stared absently at the dashboard, baffled by the lyrics. She wasn't familiar with the song because Mark *never* listened to it around her. His eyes on the road, Mark nodded slowly and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He acted casual, despite the torrent of thoughts pounding at his brain.

Rebecca asked, "You like this song?"

"Yeah. It's something different for me. I'm trying to branch out, you know?"

"I see. Well, you're right: it's definitely different."

"You like it?"

Rebecca giggled, then she said, "It's different, Mark. Whatever makes you happy."

She turned and looked out the passenger seat window. They drove through the city's poverty-stricken district. There were some condemned houses and abandoned stores, but the area wasn't completely deserted. She saw men and women on the streets—chatting, eating, *working*. She heard music from someone's boombox. She wasn't a fan of hip-hop, but she would listen to *anything* over the sad song in the hatchback.

She raised her brow and cocked her head back as they drove past Mark's street. They headed deeper into the abandoned part of the city.

She tapped the window and said, "You missed your turn. Where are we going?"

Mark said, "I told you: I made some romantic plans. I set up a romantic getaway for us, sweetie. We're going to get away from all of *this* for a while. It'll just be you and me."

"Where?"

“It’s a surprise,” Mark said. He looked at his girlfriend and smirked. He asked, “What? You don’t trust me?”

Rebecca looked out the window again. She questioned herself: *I loved him, he’s always been my friend, so why don’t I trust him now?* The bad feeling in her gut made her feel nauseous. She kept her eyes peeled, keeping track of each street and landmark in sight. She opened the Uber app on her phone. To her dismay, there were no drivers available in the immediate area. If anything went wrong and Mark kicked her out of the car, she would be stranded out there.

Mark said, “Baby, you look like you got into a car with a serial killer. You know I’m not a serial killer, right? I know I look like the guy on the sketches, but…”

Rebecca sneered at him, annoyed by his inappropriate sense of humor. She crossed her arms and scooted closer to the door. Her mind was flooded with what-if scenarios: *what if he knows about Nick? What if he dumps me out here because I cheated on him? What if he is a serial killer? What if it’s nothing and he’s really planning a romantic vacation for us?*

Mark chuckled, then he said, “I’m sorry about the joke. I’ve been really, uh… ‘gloomy’ lately, so I’m trying to get my sense of humor back. It’s just a little vacation, Rebecca. Don’t worry about a thing.”

“I don’t know if I can take a vacation right now. Not like this, Mark. It’s too sudden. I’d have to call out of work, pack my luggage, tell–”

“Tell who?” Mark interrupted.

“My parents and my friends. I’m not just going to get up and leave without luggage or without telling anyone. You know, we have to do the *normal* stuff that *normal* people do before leaving on ‘getaways.’ You should have told me earlier if you really wanted to do this.”

“I know what you mean, but you don’t have to worry about that. I’ve taken care of everything. I don’t want you to lift a single pretty finger, baby.”

“That’s very romantic, I guess. But, um… Well, why don’t you just tell me where we’re going? I’d be a lot more comfortable if you did.”

Mark guffawed—ha-ha-*ha.* He stopped at a stop sign, put the car in park, and turned in his seat to face Rebecca. He saw the fear in her big, beautiful eyes. He twitched as he felt a surge of pain from his genitals. He was

aroused, he savored his moment of power over Rebecca, but his penis was still bruised and sore from the self-mutilation.

He said, “Wow, you really are uncomfortable. You’re uncomfortable around me, aren’t you? Christ, what the hell happened to us?”

Rebecca grabbed the door handle and said, “For Christ’s sake, just answer the damn question, Mark. Where are we going?”

“And now you’re angry. Angry and uncomfortable. Well, *baby*, like I said, I’m taking you away with me. We’re going on a wild but passionate trip. I’m going to show you what love means to me. I’m going to show you how much I really love you. And, by the end of this ‘romantic’ experience, I hope I’ll win your heart back.”

“Win my heart back? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mark turned in his seat and started driving again. The music stopped playing, leaving only the sound of the humming engine in the car.

Rebecca stopped paying attention to her surroundings. She didn’t care about the neighborhood or its homeless inhabitants. She only thought about herself, Mark, and Nick. She figured Mark knew about her affair. It was obvious to most people.

She swallowed loudly, then, with a trembling voice, she said, “Mark, I’m sorry. I love you. I love you so much. You know that. But things… things haven’t been working out. People change, people grow. That means that… that they can also grow apart. I’ve made *a lot* of mistakes and I hope you can forgive me for that. I’m so sorry.”

Mark heard every word, but he wasn’t interested in her apology. To him, her voice was equivalent to the sound of a fly buzzing around his ear—*a nuisance*. He waited for her to tell him about Nick, he wanted to hear his name, but she danced around the subject, like a politician dodging hardball questions at a town hall.

Rebecca said, “I can’t go anywhere with you, Mark. I’m sorry if you spent a lot of money on this, I’m sorry if I hurt you… I’m sorry for everything. Please take me home or drop me off somewhere. Anywhere but here. Please, Mark, don’t do something stupid. We can… It’s cliché and maybe it’s annoying to hear, but we can still be friends.”

The tires screeched as the car came to a halt. The sudden stop launched them forward, then back against the seats. Rebecca pushed her hair away from her face and looked around. They finally arrived at their destination. A

damaged, desolate five-story apartment building stood to their right. There were no homeless people in sight.

“Wha–What are we doing here?” Rebecca stuttered.

Mark grabbed a steel claw hammer from under his seat. As Rebecca turned to look at him, he swung the hammer at her head. The face of the hammer collided with her left temple. The right side of her face collided with the window. Her head spun, she was dazed, but she stayed conscious. So, Mark struck her again—*and again.*

With the third blow, a small, vertical gash formed on her left temple. Blood trickled from the wound and rolled down her cheek.

“It’s better this way,” Mark whispered.

He glanced at his right hand. He held the blood-stained hammer over his shoulder. Then, he looked at his reflection on the rear-view mirror.

He laughed hysterically, then he said, “Oh God, Mark, look at yourself. When did you start crying? You’re a mess. *I’m* a mess.”

He threw the hammer into a duffel bag in the backseat. From that same bag, he retrieved a cloth and a bottle of ether. He needed Rebecca to stay unconscious while he finished his preparations.

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Chapter Nine

Revenge

Rebecca awoke with a gasp. Her eyelids fluttered open, but her vision was blurred. She groaned and whimpered and mumbled, her words slurred like a boozer's. Jolts of pain pulsated through her skull, matching the rhythm of her slow heartbeat. She felt wet and slimy from head to toe. Some of the liquid was cold, the rest was warm. She couldn't tell if she was sweating or bleeding.

She tried to swipe at the sweat racing down her forehead, but she couldn't move her arms. She heard the sound of *clinking* steel with each attempt. She lifted her head and looked down at her body. She could barely move her legs and, when she did, she heard the same *clinking* sound. But, while staring down at herself, she noticed something more alarming.

Through her blurred vision, she saw herself as a gray blot on a dirty white mattress. As her vision sharpened slowly, she started to recognize the outline of her figure.

"Wh–Why a–am I na–naked?" she mumbled.

She glanced around the room. She lay on a bed, handcuffed to the steel bed frame—arms and legs outstretched. The handcuffs were tight and the chain links were short, leaving her very little room to maneuver. Beside the bed, there was a nightstand with a lit candle on top. Those were the only two pieces of furniture in the bedroom. Lit candles stood along the walls, illuminating the room with an orange glow.

A thin beam of moonlight—no more than a millimeter thick—entered the room through a narrow slit on the boarded window. She couldn't hear anything in the building or outside on the streets.

As she ran her eyes over the padded walls, eyes dilated with fear, Rebecca whispered, "What… What is this place? Where am I?" She tried to sit up, but to no avail. She yelled, "Where the hell am I?!"

There was no immediate response. Then, a soft *beeping* sound entered the room. She looked at the door across from the foot of the bed. Before she could say another word, the door swung open.

Mark entered the room. He smiled and nodded at Rebecca, as if to say: *oh, hey there!* He closed the door behind him and then, with his hands clasped behind his back like a shy schoolboy, he approached the foot of the bed. He looked genuinely happy about something.

Her lips curling into a fierce scowl, Rebecca said, "*What… is… this?*" Her entire face twitched and tears dripped from her eyes. She asked, "Why the *hell* are you smiling right now? Th–This isn't funny. This is scary, Mark!"

Still smiling, Mark said, "I'm sorry about all of this. I'm not smiling because I'm enjoying myself or anything like that. I'm just relieved, Rebecca. I'm relieved for two reasons: you're *alive*, and I *barely* heard you out there. This was my first time soundproofing a room and I didn't fuck up. You believe that? If anyone heard you screaming around here, if a *cop* heard you… I'd be in deep shit. They can probably hear you outside because of those thin boards over the window, but after I get the gag on you, I'm pretty sure *no one* will be able to hear you. *No. One.* And, sure, I could have just gagged you from the start, but I needed to test the room, right? We need to have a chat anyway. It'd be boring if I had to do all the talking, right?"

What the fuck?—it was the only question rattling around in Rebecca's mind, but she stopped herself from uttering those words. She could see Mark was unhinged, so she didn't want to aggravate him. She felt threatened by his explanation, too. *Why would he be worried about cops if he wasn't planning something illegal?*–she thought. The hammer attack didn't help Mark's case.

Rebecca said, "Let me go."

"Don't you want to know why you're here?"

"*Let me go.* This isn't a game. You *hit* me, Mark. You hit me with a damn hammer! This isn't right! This is… This is bad! It's sick! Let me go! Please, just let me go!"

Mark sat down beside her. He watched her cry and moan hysterically. He counted the beads of sweat rolling down her stomach as it inflated and deflated with each panicked breath. He looked at her shaved crotch, then at her erect nipples, and then at the handcuffs. Those handcuffs—the mere *idea* of imprisonment—aroused him more than anything else. He patted her moist thigh and snickered, amused.

He said, “Listen, Rebecca, I know about Nick. I know about the cheating and the sex and *everything.* I’ve known about it for a while now.”

Rebecca stopped crying and wiggling on the bed. A dead silence befell the bedroom.

She shook her head slowly and stuttered, “N–No, I–I don’t know what you’re… No, Mark, it–it’s not like that.”

Mark stopped smiling. He entered a pensive state. He gazed into Rebecca’s puffy, bloodshot eyes. He wasn’t trying to intimidate her. He wanted to understand her. *Why can’t you just admit it?*–he asked himself.

Rebecca said, “It’s not what you think. It was… I needed…” In a high-pitched, whiny voice, she cried, “Mark, I loved you. I really loved you. Don’t do this.”

She looked at every corner of the room. The old, dirty bedroom suddenly resembled a serial killer’s dungeon. The severity of the situation became real to her. She believed Mark planned on killing her in that bedroom. *A crime of passion,* she thought, *he’s lost his mind*, *he’s really going to hurt me.*

She jerked every which way, flailing her limbs and bouncing on the bed. The handcuffs rattled against the steel bed frame, sounding like a large, iron triangle dinner bell. She screamed at the top of her lungs. She shouted different variations of the same thing: *help! I’m up here! He’s gone crazy!* Sometimes, she only unleashed blurts of noise—*ahh!* She screamed until her voice cracked and her throat stung.

Mark said, “Alright, alright, enough of that. You’re just wasting your energy anyway. We’re on the fifth floor of an *abandoned* building in the *abandoned* part of town with soundproof walls and boarded windows. Who do you think is going to hear you out here? Huh? This place, it’s swarming with depressed, drunk, and drugged homeless people. That’s all. None of them have access to phones to call the police and, even if they did, I don’t think any of them care enough to call the cops because of some screaming. I’ve been scoping out this area for weeks, Rebecca, and I heard women screaming *every* night. This is normal around these parts.”

Trembling in fear, Rebecca looked at the boarded window to her left. The slit of moonlight dawned on the bed. It was her only connection to the outside world, but it only served as a thin slice of hope.

“I’m here! Somebody help me! I’m up here! On… On the fifth floor! I’m trapped! I was kidnapped! Help me!” she shouted at the window.

Mark said, “It’s useless, honey. Trust me.”

“*Don’t* call me ‘honey,’ you monster,” Rebecca hissed.

“Okay, alright. Just try to relax. I won’t be able to let you out if you have a panic attack or anything like that.”

“Let me go! Oh my God! Somebody help! I’m on the fifth floor! The *fifth* floor! Please help me! I… I need help, goddammit! Why won’t anyone help me?!”

Mark chuckled, hands clasped over his lap. He waited patiently while Rebecca shouted for help. Like a feisty chihuahua, she couldn’t go on forever. She was out of energy—and breath—within five minutes. Screaming was exhausting. Only the sound of her deep, hoarse breathing dominated the bedroom.

Mark asked, “Do you remember that serial killer, Edgar White?”

Rebecca glared at him, but she didn’t say a word. She needed a moment to catch her breath.

Mark said, “Maybe you don’t. He was all over the news, but you always ignore that kind of stuff, don’t you? Well, he was a serial killer. The kids called him ‘*The Bum Basher.*’ Right here, in this same neighborhood, he killed *eleven* homeless people. He beat them to death with baseball bats, bolt cutters, bricks… bike locks… *rocks*…”

An image of Tyler’s bloody, crushed head flashed in his mind. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head, as if he expected the memory to fade away like the signal on an old television.

He said, “The point is: the people around here knew about him, but they didn’t report him. Most of the evidence was flushed away when it rained or stolen by other homeless people. He only got caught because he was busted in some prostitution sting and he had the bolt cutters in the trunk. I’m not going to use weapons like that, though. I’m not going to carry any ‘evidence’ with me, either. It’s going to stay here. If they find you, then I’m busted anyway, but I’m not going to lead them here or lead them to me.”

Rebecca said, “You can’t get away with this. This isn’t you, Mark. You’re going to get caught and, when that happens, they’ll put you away for a very long time. End this before it’s too late.”

“It’s already too late.”

“It’s not. Let me go and I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

Mark laughed and said, “Oh, please. Rebecca, we both know you’d tell the world if I let you go. I’m not stupid. I’ve actually planned all of this out. Your friends and your family don’t know you’re here. Jane probably saw me picking you up, right? But that doesn’t mean shit. What’s she going to say? She saw me pick you up from work? Whoop-de-fuckin’-doo. I can lie my way out of that. She can’t help you. Your cell phone? You think they’re going to ‘track’ it? I took it apart and spread the parts near the creek on the *other* side of the city. It can’t help you. There’s *nothing* you can do to get out of this.”

Rebecca sniffed and panted. Her eyes darted to the left, then to the right. She wondered if she could break the handcuffs or the bedposts. *If I break free from here, I’d still have to break down some doors,* she thought, *then who knows what else he’s done to the rest of the apartment.* She felt like she was part of a larger trap.

Mark looked at the handcuffs and said, “There’s a slight possibility that you can break free. The bed frame is old, you might get some of that mythical ‘hysterical strength’ people talk about on the news, but I really don’t think you can get away. This is the end of the road for you. This is your final chapter. But… it’s going to be one *long* chapter, *honey.* I have a lot to do to you.”

“A–A lot to do to me?” Rebecca repeated, awed. “L–Like wha–what?”

Mark moseyed over to the closet. He put on a pair of latex gloves, then he grabbed the leather case from the floor. He placed the case on the nightstand, then he pulled a small bottle of blood and a syringe out of it. He carefully opened the bottle, acting as if he were dealing with radioactive material. Rebecca read the label on the bottle: *HIV.* The pieces didn’t immediately connect in her mind. Infected blood, a syringe, a makeshift prison, a psychotic boyfriend—it was all so surreal to her.

Rebecca asked, “What’s happening? What are you planning?”

“Don’t fight me. It’ll only get worse for you if you try to fight me.”

“Answer me, damn it.”

“I’m going to inject you with–”

“No!” Rebecca yelled as she bounced frantically on the bed. She ended up on the other end of the mattress. She glared at him and shouted, “I’m not

going to let you *inject* me with whatever is in that damn needle! Stay the hell away from me! Don't–"

Mark pressed down on the needle's plunger and shot a squirt of blood at Rebecca. The infected blood landed on her face, from her chin to her forehead. The blood touched the wound on her temple, dripped into her right eye, streamed across her nose, and even landed in her mouth. HIV-infected blood tasted like all other blood—*metallic.*

As Rebecca coughed and hacked, Mark said, "Right now, you have a low risk of being infected with HIV. It's possible, but… who knows. I'm just telling you what I read. The risk of infection is lower when the infected blood comes into contact with the mouth, the eyes, or skin that's already been cut. Well, *broken.* That's the word they used: *broken.* So, you're a smart girl, Rebecca. You can probably guess what raises your chances of infection, right?"

"Don–Don't do this. Sta–Stay a–away from me, you–"

Mark grabbed her left arm at the bicep and stopped her from jerking away. He stabbed her once at the crook of her arm with the needle. She yelped and cried and tried to pull away, but her efforts were fruitless. He pulled the needle out of her arm, tightened his grip on her bicep, and then he punctured her bulging basilic vein with the dirty needle. But he didn't press down on the plunger.

He removed the needle and then he returned the syringe to the leather case. Rebecca looked at her arm, then at the case, and then at Mark.

Panicking, she stammered, "Wha–Wha–What did you–you do? Why… Why did… Oh my God, why did you do that?" Her lips trembled uncontrollably, tears oozed out of her eyes, and her voice began to shake. She said, "Pl–Please tell me it was fake. Mark, tell me it was… it wasn't really blood, was it? It's all fake, right? Oh God, please answer me. I–I'm begging you."

"It wasn't fake. I purchased this blood from a prostitute."

"Oh God…"

"I tried not to inject any into your bloodstream. I don't know her blood type. I actually don't know yours, either. If they didn't match, we could have caused a deadly hemolytic reaction, like when a blood transfusion goes wrong. But, since I squirted some at you, some of that blood stayed on

the needle. And since I used that needle to create a fresh wound—*the injection*—the likeliness of you contracting HIV…”

“*Oh God…*”

“Has probably increased quite a bit.”

Oh God, oh God, oh God—Rebecca was out of words. She fell into a state of disbelief. She had witnessed graphic violence in movies and she saw the pain and suffering humans inflicted upon each other on the news, but she never experienced anything like that in the bedroom. Her boyfriend, a man she once loved, purposely infected her with a dangerous virus.

Mark said, “I decided to infect you with HIV first because it takes a very long time for the symptoms to show up. It takes even longer to develop AIDS. *Years.* And that’s without treatment.” He zipped up his supplies, then he placed the bag in the closet. He said, “I believe the fevers come first. Then you might develop some rashes and lesions. Nights sweats are common, so don’t worry too much about that.”

“Don’t worry too much about that?” Rebecca repeated. “Are you kidding me? This has to be some sort of sick joke. Tell me you’re lying. Please tell me you’re not *that* fucking crazy.”

Mark walked to the foot of the bed, he shrugged, and he said, “I’m not lying. It’s the truth, honey. It’s the truth.”

“Oh my God!” Rebecca shouted with obvious desperation in her voice.

She thrashed about on the bed and cried hysterically. Mark just stood there and watched her. He gave her a few minutes and allowed her to weep. It was the least he could do.

As she settled down, he said, “I’ll stop by to check on you often. I’ll give you something to drink, I’ll feed you, I’ll clean you up, and I’ll give you some more ‘special’ fluids.”

Tears and blood shimmering on her face, she said, “No, no, no. This can’t be happening. Please, Mark, don’t do this. I’ll do anything.” Mark walked around the room and blew out the candles. Rebecca said, “Please… *please*. Mark, I’ll do anything, ba–baby. Honey. Sweetie. Darling. I’m sorry. Just let me go. We can work this out, can’t we?”

Mark approached the last lit candle in the bedroom—the one on the nightstand. He crouched beside it, ensuring his face was illuminated by the dancing flame. His expression was blank, cold and heartless. It wasn’t a

sick joke or a stupid prank for some viral YouTube video. He was hurt by Rebecca's betrayal and he was hellbent on exacting his revenge.

He blew out the candle, leaving the room with only a slit of moonlight from the window. He ignored Rebecca's screaming as he walked out of the room. The door locked on its own automatically. He turned the handle twice just to be safe. From the living room, he heard all of Rebecca's insults: 'baby' turned into *bastard*, 'sweetie' turned into *shithead*, 'darling' turned into *dickhole.* She hurled every insult in the book at him.

He thought about gagging her, but he was afraid. If she managed to bite him and break his skin while he gagged her, he feared he would be infected as well. It wasn't likely to spread so quickly after the initial transmission, but he couldn't take that risk. He figured he could safely gag her after a few days of neglect anyway.

Mark exited the apartment. Again, the door locked on its own behind him, but he turned the handle to make sure it was secured. To his delight, Rebecca's voice was barely audible in the hallway.

As he walked down the hall, he smiled and whispered, "Everything's fine. I'm doing the right thing. She deserves this… and I've earned it."

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Chapter Ten

Day 14

"Okay, so one mushroom burger, one bacon double-cheeseburger, one order of fries, one order of sweet potato fries, and two small drinks… That'll be twenty-six dollars and twenty cents," Mark said as he tapped the screen on the cash register. The man and his teenage son paid with a debit card. Mark smiled at them and said, "Thank you. Your number is seventy-nine. Should be ready in fifteen minutes."

He placed two paper cups on the counter. He watched as the customers grabbed their cups, filled their drinks at the soda dispenser, and then sat down at a booth and waited for their order.

The lunch rush had slowed to a crawl, but the restaurant—a fast food joint called *Big's Burgers*—was still bustling with activity. Teenagers, couples, families, and even lonesome diners enjoyed the locally-famous burgers and fries. Some sipped on milkshakes, others took gulps of their soft drinks. Their chatter was indistinguishable, but the mood was pleasant.

Leaning over the counter, Mark watched a couple at the other end of the restaurant. They sat at a small table beside a ceiling-height window, cars zooming past them on the busy street. The teenagers ate burgers, fed each other some fries, and shared their milkshakes. He took a sip of hers, she took a sip of his. Big's Burgers wasn't the best place for a date, but they looked genuinely happy.

Mark was surprised by the young man's appearance. He reminded him of himself during his teenage years—tall, skinny-fat, and acne-riddled. His date, on the other hand, was beautiful. Her light brown eyes glimmered with optimism, her face had a youthful glow, her body was curvy but fit, and her cinnamon-colored skin was flawless. She reminded him of Rebecca, despite their limited similarities.

He figured the young man won her heart thanks to his charisma and humor. He could hear them laughing over the rest of the chatter in the restaurant. The laughter angered him. *Why? Why am I so pissed off right*

now?–he thought. He looked down at his hands. His fists were clenched, fingernails driven into his palms.

He wasn't just angry. It wasn't the same anger he felt when someone cut him off in traffic or held up a line at a busy store. He was *infuriated.* His face was flushed, webs of veins protruding from his neck and forehead. His piercing eyes looked as if they were vibrating. He only heard their laughter and the sound of his grinding teeth.

Through his gritted teeth, he muttered, "You think you're better than me, don't you? They think you're more handsome for some reason, they like you for some *fuckin'* reason. You've got it all and I've got nothing. That's my life, huh? You… Oh, you're just like Nick. You little bastard… And you too, you stupid slut. I'm going to… I'll…"

His rage stopped him from finishing his sentence. He looked around. He wanted to find a way to exact his revenge against someone who did *nothing* to him. He stared at the cooks and wished he could spit on the burgers. He wanted to piss in their soft drinks and shit in their milkshakes. Then, he thought about beating the young man with a tray. He had killed someone before with a rock, so he figured he could get it done.

He looked back at the couple, his entire body moving with each heavy breath. He saw himself throwing the young woman over the table and tearing her clothes off while her boyfriend watched helplessly. In his twisted imagination, he squeezed her breasts tightly until her chest turned red and blue. Then, he pictured himself chewing on her erect nipples.

"Mark," a male voice interrupted.

Mark gasped, blinked erratically, and staggered away from the counter. He glanced over his shoulder, wide-eyed. His boss, David Diaz, stood behind him. He looked like the other employees: a blue polo shirt, black work pants, and matching shoes. He wore a headset and a *Big's Burgers*-branded cap, though.

"You alright?" David asked with a furrowed brow.

Mark wiped the sweat from his forehead and said, "Yeah, yeah. I'm okay. I, um… I just got a little lightheaded. That's all."

"*O*–kay. Well, maybe we should take you off the register for now. Let a rookie take over while it's slow. It's good practice."

"Sure. So what do you want me to do?"

“Sorry, but… the bathroom is a mess. Some homeless asshole snuck in there and wrecked the place about thirty minutes ago. You mind cleaning it up?”

Yes, I mind, that was never part of my job description—Mark bit his tongue before he could lash out at his boss. Mutiny wasn’t accepted in most jobs, especially from ‘expendable’ employees.

He sighed, then he said, “Yeah, I’ll get on that.”

“Great, that’s awesome. Let me know if you need anything, my man.”

Mark made his way to the restroom—a single room with one toilet and a sink. He caught a whiff of a rancid odor before reaching the door. It smelled like old vomit, fresh piss, and diarrhea blended together. He slapped his hand over his mouth as soon as he opened the door. His eyes watered, his head hurt. He felt vomit climbing up his throat, but he choked it down.

Feces covered nearly every inch of the only toilet in the restroom. The chunky crap even dripped from the edge of the rim. Shitty handprints decorated the white walls like a child’s drawings in a new home. Urine flooded the floor, flowing through the grooves between the tiles and mixing with some of the feces. The sink was covered in a thick, orange substance—as if someone had eaten a bag of Cheetos only to vomit immediately afterward.

Mark was disgusted by the damage. Yet, at the same time, he couldn’t help but feel some pity for the homeless culprit. *You’re just sick and desperate*, he thought, *I can’t help you, but you can help me.* He lowered his hand and ran his eyes over the mess. The side of his lips rose to form a big, arrogant grin. A horrendous idea crept into his mind.

“I need some plastic bags,” he whispered.

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Mark stood in the bedroom doorway. He wore a pair of latex gloves, a surgical mask, and safety goggles. The risk of infection increased with each passing day. He wasn’t going to take any chances.

Rebecca lay on the bed, handcuffed to the bedposts. Her teeth scraped the red ball gag shoved into her mouth. Her groaning was loud, but it couldn’t penetrate the soundproof composite on the walls. A cold sweat drenched her body, leaving her slimy hair sprawled across the mattress and her face. Her lips were chapped, her nose was rosy, and her eyes were bloodshot.

A quilted puppy potty pad was placed under her ass. The pad was drowned in urine and stained with feces.

Mark entered the bedroom. The floorboards creaked with each slow, calculated step. He took his sweet time, purposely trying to build up the tension in the room. Rebecca followed him with her big, bugged-out eyes. She breathed deeply through her nose while goops of saliva dribbled across her cheek, like drool from a dog's mouth.

"You're still alive," Mark said, his voice muffled by the mask. "Like I've been telling you: I'll take care of you. I might only be able to see you once a night, but that's okay. It's enough, obviously. Things are working out, aren't they?"

Rebecca could only lay there and glare at him. She wanted to attack him —verbally *and* physically. She already crafted her own plan: as soon as the opportunity presented itself, she hoped to chomp into his neck and tear through his jugular. She wasn't ready to die, but if death was inevitable, she wanted to take him with her.

Mark removed the potty pad from underneath her. He crumpled it up and tossed it into a plastic bag. He grabbed a wet wipe from a backpack near the foot of the bed. Rebecca squirmed and whimpered as he wiped her clean from her anus to her vagina. He threw the wet wipe into the plastic bag, then he slid a fresh potty pad under her ass.

He said, "There you go, all clean. Now, let's get some food into your tummy, baby. I can't have you starving." He reached for her face, but he stopped before touching the gag. He said, "If you do anything stupid, I promise you: you *will* regret it. I'll respect you as long as you respect me. But I won't show any mercy if you betray me again. Accept it, Rebecca. This is your fate. Okay? Are we clear?"

Rebecca kept glaring at him. She considered fighting him, but her survival instincts wouldn't allow it. She was hungry and she smelled food. So, with tears hanging from her eyelashes, she nodded at her captor.

Mark smiled and said, "Good girl."

He unbuckled the gag, then he pulled the ball out of her mouth. Saliva dripped onto her chin and neck. Rebecca's hoarse breathing echoed through the room, but she didn't say a word.

Mark pulled a brown paper bag out of the backpack. Rebecca's eyes sparkled and a smile stretched across her face as soon as she saw the bag—

a *Big's Burgers* bag. She had only been fed canned tuna, canned beans, and Pop Tarts since her captivity began. Fast food was a luxury. The scent of a bacon double cheeseburger walloped her nostrils as he unwrapped the food.

"You hungry?" Mark asked, despite knowing the answer.

Rebecca nodded as she lifted her head from the pillow. She leaned in for a bite, her lips shaking with excitement.

Mark pulled the burger away and said, "Come on, say it. 'I'm hungry, master.' Say it or I won't feed you."

Humiliation was a form of torture. Pillories were used to humiliate criminals in public. Troublesome students were forced to sit in the corners of their classrooms. During the Second World War, French women accused of collaborating with the Nazis had their heads shaved and then they were paraded through the streets.

Mark knew about the negative psychological effects connected to humiliation: *depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts.* Humiliation left scars on his mind, so he wanted to use it against Rebecca. He suffered because of her actions, he was embarrassed by her affair, so he wanted to share his pain.

With a soft, croaky voice, Rebecca stuttered, "I–I'm hungry, master."

"Please feed me, master."

"Please… Please feed me, master."

"Good girl. You're such a good girl."

Mark fed her the burger and fries. The food was cold, but she devoured all of it. Mustard and ketchup rolled down her cheeks and chin. Each bite was wet and mushy, each gulp was loud and exaggerated. He dumped some water in her mouth. She drank it as quickly as possible, swallowing mouthful after mouthful. Then she coughed and retched as the water flooded her throat.

Mark chuckled as he screwed the cap onto the water bottle. He said, "I'm sorry about that. I wasn't trying to drown you or anything like that. You just seemed so thirsty, baby." He pulled a paper cup out of the brown bag, a liquid *swishing* inside. He said, "I brought you a cup of your favorite soda: *Cherry Coke.* I'd give it to you, but… Well, I heard soda makes people thirstier. And I only have this one bottle of water. I don't want to torture you *too* badly, so… I'll let you decide. You wanna drink the soda and stay a little dehydrated tonight? Or do you want me to have it? I

brought it for you, I wanted it to be like a special treat, but it's risky, you know? Too much caffeine, too much sugar, too much sodium. Yadda yadda…"

Rebecca wheezed and coughed as she glared at Mark. She sensed his patronizing tone. She thought about attacking him, but she knew he had the upper hand.

Mark stood up from the bed and said, "Thank you, baby. I always loved Cherry Coke. Not as much as Vanilla Coke, but I still loved it. We never shared a cup, though. Not like those other couples… Two straws in one cup. You feed me, I feed you. No, we didn't do that." He took a sip of the soda and walked to the foot of the bed. He said, "But, hey, at least I never forgot your favorite soda. That makes me a good boyfriend, right, baby?"

For crying out loud, you sick bastard, remembering my favorite soda doesn't make you a good boyfriend, Rebecca thought. *You kidnapped me, you beat me, you sprayed blood at me and stabbed me with a needle. You're not even human, you're a sick, confused, perverted monster. And stop calling me 'baby,' asshole.*

Yet, despite the powerful urge to attack him, she bottled her anger and bit her tongue. She focused on survival, and survival meant appeasement.

She asked, "What day is it?"

"Does it matter? What? Are you going to be late for something?" Mark asked, grinning under his mask.

"I want to know how long I've been here, how long you've kept me captive like this."

"I feel like it would be more… *torturous* if I left you in the dark, but what the hell, you've been on your best behavior. You've earned this. So, you've been here for about two weeks."

Rebecca was awed. She tried to keep track of the passing days, counting each beam of sunshine and moonlight that entered the room, but she lost track. Two weeks was a long time—fourteen days, 336 hours, 20,160 minutes, *1,209,600 seconds*. Pessimistic thoughts dragged themselves into her mind. She remembered all of the statistics she read on the news and saw on crime shows.

The first forty-eight hours were vital to homicide and missing persons cases. After that, the trail went cold—as cold as a dead body.

Rebecca sniffled and said, “I know you’re mad at me. I know you’re going to hurt me. But… I need to know the truth.”

“About what?”

“About the blood. Was it really infected with… with…”

“HIV?”

Rebecca closed her eyes and nodded. Fresh tears flowed down to her ears. She was scared of the truth, but she needed to know the answer.

Mark said, “You’ll find out soon.”

“You bastard!” Rebecca yelled.

She spit at him. The blob of saliva struck his shoulder. He felt something moist on his neck, too, but he remained calm. She clenched her teeth and glowered at him, drawing deep breaths through her nose.

Mark approached the closet and said, “Don’t misinterpret my reaction, Rebecca. You’re probably thinking: *if it was really infected blood, he’d be going crazy right now because I spit on him.* Well, that would probably be true if I didn’t do my research. You see, in order to spread infections like this, you need direct contact most of the time. *Direct. Contact.* Let me show you an example.”

Rebecca stopped breathing. The fire in her eyes was extinguished. Her scowl turned into a frown. The look on her face said something along the lines of: *oh no, not again.*

***

Mark pulled the leather case out of the closet. He placed it on the nightstand. Once again, he removed a hypodermic syringe and a bottle of blood from the bag. The bottle was labeled: *HBV.*

“Hey, Mark, please stop this,” Rebecca cried. “I don’t understand why you’re doing this. I cheated on you. I fucked up, but I don’t deserve this. No one–”

Mark sprayed the blood at her face. Rebecca lifted her head from the mattress and coughed violently, like when food went down the wrong pipe. The blood spilled into her throat as she spoke. Along with the fear of suffocating, the worst thoughts entered her mind: *he did it again, he infected me with more blood, I’m going to die.* A streak of blood stretched from her jaw to her forehead.

Mark grabbed her forearm and stabbed a vein on her bicep with the needle. A droplet of blood oozed out of the microscopic puncture wound as

soon as he pulled the needle out. But he sought to guarantee an infection. So, he moved down and stabbed the cephalic vein on her forearm with the needle, theoretically doubling the chances of spreading the virus.

Rebecca bounced on the bed and yelled, “No! Please! No! I’m sorry, Mark! Stop it! Don’t do this! Why are you… Oh my God, stop it!”

Mark pulled the needle out and stepped back. He snickered as he watched Rebecca’s hysterical reaction. *It’s just hepatitis,* he wanted to say, *what’s the big deal?* He wasn’t done, either. He retrieved a large, shiny chef’s knife from the backpack. He squirted the rest of the blood onto the blade. Then, with the back of his gloved hand, he spread the blood across the sharp edge of the blade—from the heel to the tip.

As he examined the infected instrument of torture, he said, “Hepatitis isn’t a ‘popular’ infection. You don’t hear about it like you hear about HIV and AIDS. It’s still dangerous, even when it’s *silently* moving through your body. You see, a lot of times, there are no symptoms to hepatitis-b. Shit, with all the cheating you did, you probably already caught it and you didn’t even know it.”

“Stop it,” Rebecca said. “Please stop it.”

“On the other hand, when the infected person *does* feel the symptoms, it can feel like hell,” Mark continued, ignoring her pleas. “I wish I brought a printout or some pictures, but I guess we’ll just have to work with my memory. Let’s see… Symptoms include joint pain, hive-like rashes, nausea, vomiting, headaches, fevers, um… You’ll lose your appetite, your urine will be darker, and the whites of your eyes will turn yellow. I believe they call that ‘jaundice.’ Basically, your liver swells. Without proper medical treatment, that can lead to liver cancer. And liver cancer can lead to death. It’s fucked up, isn’t it? Cancer is a bitch, ain’t she?”

“You’re not going to get away with this. There’s *no way* you’re getting away with this. My family will come looking for me *and* you. They knew we were still dating. And they know… they know I was unhappy with you. You know you’re the prime suspect, don’t you? The cops are going to come knocking if they haven’t already and, when they do, you’re not going to be able to outsmart them. We’re running out of time, Mark. Let me go and we might be able to fix this. I’ll lie for you, I’ll tell them anything to save you—to save *us.* Everything will be okay if you just stop and do the right thing.”

Mark stood in silence and stared down at her. His narrowed eyes could be seen through his foggy goggles. He looked as if he were actually considering her offer.

He said, “Everything won’t be okay.”

***

Mark rushed around to the left side of the bed. He placed his knee on Rebecca’s right shoulder, her tendons and bones *cracking* under the pressure. He grabbed her wrist and pinned her arm to the mattress. He ran his eyes over her forearm, which was craggy with thick, bulging veins. He imagined himself severing those veins and showering in her blood.

Why? Why would I want to do that knowing she’s infected?–he thought. He shook his head, trying his best to focus on the matter at hand. He placed the tip of the blade near her wrist.

Rebecca kicked and screamed, but to no avail. She even tried to bite his knee, but she could barely scrape his thick jeans with her teeth.

Mark pushed down on the handle and cut into her arm. Rebecca couldn’t see a thing. She felt the blade as it sliced through her tender skin, leaving a curved laceration on her wrist. Then, she felt the warm blood oozing out of the cut. She gasped and her eyes widened as Mark cut into her arm again. The lacerations were straight but deep. Blood drenched her arm and soaked the mattress

Rebecca let out a bloodcurdling shriek and thrashed about on the bed. Yet, like a professional bull rider, Mark did not lose his balance. He placed more pressure on her shoulder and wrist, then he continued slicing into her arm clumsily. Geysers of blood squirted out of the cuts, splattering on his arms, stomach, and chest.

“Oh God, stop! It–It burns!” Rebecca shouted. “Somebody help me! Please! S–Stop him!”

Mark stood from the bed. His mask fluttered as he breathed deeply. He stared down at her, eyes glimmering with pride and admiration. *I did that,* he thought, *I did it all on my own.* Sniveling, Rebecca looked at her mutilated arm. Carved into her forearm, crooked but legible, a word read: *cheater.* Jolts of stinging, tingling pain surged across her entire arm.

Mark grabbed a gauze roll from the backpack. He wrapped the gauze around her butchered forearm in order to stop the bleeding.

He said, “Don’t worry, you’ll survive.”

“It hurts so… so much. I need to go to a–a hospital. Take me to a hospital, please.”

“You know I can’t and *won’t* do that. Besides, I’m not done yet.”

“Wha–What do you mean?”

“Don’t move so much next time. This knife is *sharp*, Rebecca. I could easily stab you by mistake. You know I don’t want to do that, baby.”

Unable to control herself, Rebecca stammered, “Ne–Ne–Ne–Next t–time?”

Mark crawled over her squirming body. Before she could even try to jerk away, he placed his knee on her left shoulder and grabbed her wrist. The knife in his left hand, his arm trembled as he cut into her forearm. Rebecca’s shaking and screaming didn’t help. The lacerations were deep and sloppy, her blood as dark as black ink. Each slice was accompanied by a moist *crinkling* sound—the sound of oozing blood and tearing skin.

Rebecca looked at her arm and sobbed. His penmanship was awful, the ‘r’ looked like a ‘v,’ but she could read the word. Carved into her forearm, the word read: *whore*. She was embarrassed by the carvings. If she survived, she would be marked for the rest of her life. *I am a cheater,* she thought, *am I a whore, too?* For a moment, the pain allowed her to forget about the diseases possibly lurking in her blood.

Then she remembered about the infected blood on the knife. She screamed as the shame, pain, and fear overwhelmed her.

Mark wrapped another gauze roll around her forearm. Within seconds, the bandage was heavy with blood. He crawled down to the foot of the bed, his knees between her thighs. He looked her over. She had lost a few pounds since her captivity began. Her ribs became more prominent with each passing day. One meal per day was enough to survive, but it wasn’t healthy.

He placed the edge of the blade against her navel, vertically across her bellybutton. He slid the blade up her stomach and then he stopped between her cleavage. He wiggled the blade left and right. He nicked her chest, but the pain from that cut couldn’t compare to the throbbing agony she felt in her forearms. A droplet of blood rolled down to her stomach, blending with the beads of cold sweat.

“Which way should I go, honey? Left or right?” Mark asked. “And be specific. *My* left or *my* right? Hmm?”

Rebecca couldn’t say a word. Only the sound of the *rattling* handcuffs echoed through the apartment. She thought: *what the hell are you talking about?*

Mark slid the blade towards her right breast. Rebecca gasped, then she held her breath. She watched as Mark circled her nipple with the tip of the knife. One false move and the blade would tear into her areola, she knew that very well. She looked away and closed her eyes. She *felt* the blade against the Montgomery glands on her areola, but she kept her composure.

Mark moved the knife away from her breast for a moment. After a few seconds, Rebecca felt the blade against her other areola. Then, Mark *flicked* her nipple with the tip of the knife—like he did with his tongue before sucking her nipples when they were intimate. Rebecca feared he would sever her nipple if she moved. So, she lay as still as a corpse.

She sighed in relief as Mark moved the blade away from her chest. But she kept her eyes closed, too scared to peek—too scared to face reality. Then, she felt the bloody blade gliding across the fuzz on her crotch. Her eyes swung open and she looked down at herself. She saw Mark sitting between her legs like a gargoyle, examining her genitals while scratching her crotch with the blade.

“Don’t,” Rebecca said in a hushed, desperate voice. “Please, Mark, I’m begging you. Anywhere… Cut me anywhere but *there*.”

Mark asked, “Why? Hmm? Why should I let someone else fuck you when I can’t? Why should I let you feel pleasure when *I can’t?*”

“Please, Mark. Please…”

Mark gazed into Rebecca’s eyes for some thirty seconds. He wanted to memorize the pain and fear in her eyes. He turned his attention to her genitals. He slid the edge of the blade across her crotch once more, as if he were trying to shave some of her pubic hair. In fact, the blade actually cut through some of the short hair. He pulled the knife away and shrugged at her.

He stood from the bed and said, “I’m not going to cut you like that, baby. I don’t believe in genital mutilation. I’m not a *savage*, you know? I’m just a normal person. Yup, that’s me. Mr. Forgettable…” He put the knife in the backpack. He said, “I had something else planned for you anyway. A ‘friend’ left a mess in the bathroom at work today. I think he wanted you to have this.”

“What are you talking about?”

Mark pulled a black plastic bag out of the backpack. *Slushing* and *squelching* sounds emerged from the bag. It couldn’t have been water. He hopped onto the bed and towered over Rebecca, his feet under her armpits. He held the bag over her head and untied the knot on top, releasing a malodorous stench into the bedroom. *More blood? A dead animal? Rotten food?*–Rebecca thought.

Rebecca said, “You’re killing me. Can’t you see that? I know you’re angry, but you’re actually–”

Mark had heard enough. He flipped the bag over. For a split second—a nanosecond that felt like an hour—Rebecca saw diarrhea roll out of the bag like a mudslide. She couldn’t stop it from raining down on her face. She could only watch it fall.

Splat!

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Chapter Eleven

What Happened to Rebecca Lucio?

A pornographic video played on the monitor. In the video, a middle-aged man sat on a recliner and watched his young wife fuck another man on a sofa nearby. She rode him in the cowgirl position, her bleached asshole exposed for the world to see and her breasts flopping with each bounce. After a few minutes in that position, the young woman dismounted him. Her ‘husband’ crawled to the sofa, then he performed fellatio on the man.

The video was titled: *Pathetic husband shares a cock with his wife.*

Mark sat in front of his computer, his sweatpants around his ankles. He stroked his scarred penis slowly. He wanted to avoid another painful injury. He couldn’t stop himself from masturbating, though. The mere thought of cuckold porn aroused him immensely. The video hypnotized him. It made him feel normal. For a moment, he saw himself sucking Nick’s dick while Rebecca watched from the sidelines. The world around him was muted.

Then, he heard knocking on his front door.

He glanced over his shoulder. He spotted the silhouette of a person at his window. Someone was trying to peek into his apartment. Another person knocked on the front door again—*tap, tap, tap.* He wondered how long they had been out there. He lost track of time *and* his surroundings during his masturbation session. He paused the video, minimized the window, turned off the monitor, and pulled his sweatpants up, and then he moseyed to the door.

“How can I help you?” he asked as he opened the door.

He found himself staring at two men—a blonde-haired white guy and a bald black man. He didn’t need an answer to his question. He instantly predicted their occupations and the reason for their visit. It was obvious from their clothing. They wore blazers, dress shirts with ties, and matching pants and shoes. They were partners, but they weren’t there to commit any crimes.

The blonde-haired man said, “Good evening. My name is Travis Hunt. This is my partner, Darren Jones. We’re with the Adult Missing Persons unit

at the Redwood Police Department. You are Mark Murray, correct?" Mark answered with a nod. Travis said, "It's good to finally meet you. We'd like to ask you a few questions. Is that okay with you, sir?"

Umm, uhh—the sounds of confusion and reluctance escaped Mark's gaping mouth. He glanced over his shoulder and looked into his filthy apartment, then he looked back at the detectives.

He said, "Is this, um… Am I… Is something wrong?"

"Yes," Travis responded. "We'd like to have a chat. We can sit down with you here or we can go to a diner or we can go to the station. It doesn't really matter to us."

"So, is this, like, mandatory or something?"

"It is not, but we believe it would only be beneficial for you and our case."

Mark bit his bottom lip and nodded, cycling through his options in his head. *I can just say 'no' and pretend like I know my rights, I can ignore this and forget about it,* he thought, *but that might make me look guilty and I'd miss my chance to defend myself.* He wasn't ready for an interrogation, he had never actually spoken to a cop for longer than five minutes in his short lifetime, but he felt compelled to cooperate. He couldn't arouse any suspicion.

He said, "Okay, sure. I have to work the night shift tonight, so I only have a few minutes, but… *okay.* Come in." He stepped aside and beckoned to the detectives. As they entered his apartment, he said, "I'm sorry, I only have two chairs for my dining table. I don't usually have a lot of people over."

"You mind if I sit here?" Darren asked, pointing at the computer chair.

Mark hesitated. He feared the detective would tamper with his computer if he looked away. The cuckold porn on his web browser didn't comfort him, either. But he could *not* arouse any suspicion.

He said, "Sure, go for it."

Mark and Travis sat at the dining table, Darren sat on the rolling chair. There was a moment of unusual silence—*dead silence*, as if time had reached a sudden stop.

Travis pulled a small notepad and a pen out of his coat pocket. He flipped the notepad open and scribbled a note. It was illegible from Mark's side of the table.

Travis said, “So, like I said, we’re with the Adult Missing Persons unit. We’d like to ask you a few questions about Rebecca Lucio.”

Mark swallowed the lump in his throat, then he repeated, “*Rebecca?*”

“Yes, Rebecca Lucio. Just to confirm, what is your relation to Ms. Lucio?”

Now’s my chance, Mark told himself, *you practiced this for hours, you can do this.* He closed his eyes tightly and shook his head, as if he had just heard something disturbing.

He said, “I’m sorry. Did, um… Just give me a second. Are you saying something happened to Rebecca? Or is she trying to blame me for something? What’s going on here?”

His brow furrowed, Darren asked, “You don’t know?”

“Know *what?*”

The detectives looked at each other, eyes filled with uncertainty. They had seen it all before, though. Throughout their careers in law enforcement, they had questioned thousands of people. They weren’t quite ready to pin the blame on Mark, but they were suspicious.

Travis said, “I guess you’ve been in the dark, huh? Well, Rebecca Lucio is missing. She was reported missing over two weeks ago. Eighteen days, to be exact.”

“Holy shit,” Mark whispered.

He lowered his head and stared down at himself, his brow creased and his eyes wet with tears. He seemed to be genuinely dumbstruck and saddened by the news. He had been rehearsing that performance for months. He was good, he was authentic.

Travis said, “Usually, a missing person case is resolved within 72 hours because that person is *voluntarily* missing, which means they weren’t kidnapped or held hostage or murdered or sold to a network of criminals. They either got lost in an area with bad phone signal for a day or two, they needed a break from the stress of the world so they completely logged off, or an overbearing friend or family member reported them missing prematurely just because they got worried. That’s how many of these cases usually go down.”

“But Ms. Lucio’s case is different,” Darren said. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He said, “It’s different because, well, she’s still missing. So, we’re here trying to find some answers.”

“Answers to what, sir?” Mark asked.

“What happened to Rebecca Lucio? Where has that young woman gone? Why didn’t she tell anyone? Why are you apparently the *last* person to have seen her?”

Mark opened his mouth, but he stopped himself from saying a single word. It was part of his performance. He wanted to portray himself as stunned and flabbergasted. *They’re trying to blame me,* he thought, *but they would have arrested me already if they actually had enough evidence.* He clenched his jaw in order to stop himself from smirking.

He sighed, then he said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know anything about a disappearance or who saw her last or–”

“As of today, *you* saw her last, Mr. Murray,” Darren interrupted. “We have witnesses who saw you picking her up from The Green Flamingo on November 9th, just past three in the morning.”

Jane, you snitch, Mark thought. He kept a straight face.

Travis knocked on the table and asked, “So, what happened on November 9th? Where’s Rebecca, Mark?”

Mark said, “Look, I’m not going to be able to help you much. I saw Rebecca a few weeks ago. Maybe it was the 9th, maybe it wasn’t. We drove around the block for a while and we spoke about…” He paused to bite his lip and wipe the tears from his eyes. He said, “We spoke about her ‘infidelity.’ She had been cheating on me for months. Everyone knew about it: her friends, her coworkers, her parents. And everyone knew she was seeing this guy, Nick Moreno, behind my back and they didn’t tell me.”

“That must have made you very angry,” Darren said.

Mark sniffled and, with a trembling voice, he said, “It made me very fucking sad, man. I loved that girl and she dumped me.”

“She dumped you?”

“Yeah, man! I asked her to make a choice. I told her it was either me or him. She couldn’t keep both of us, you know? She… She picked him. So, out of anger, I drove over to his neighborhood, I opened her door, and I kicked her out of my car. If anything, *Nick* would know where she is. Have you even asked him about this? Shit, they probably ran off and got married. Goddammit…”

Mark covered his eyes and sobbed. He muttered to himself—*shit, damn it, why me?* He limited his vocabulary and he controlled the tone of his

voice. He didn’t want to appear hateful or vengeful in front of the detectives. If he overacted, he would surely remain the prime suspect in the case.

The detectives kept their eyes on Mark, reading every slight movement across his face and body. They couldn’t decide if he was a witness or a suspect. They didn’t trust him, but they believed him. They had more leads to follow. Truth be told, it was the first time they heard that name—*Nick Moreno.*

Travis asked, “So, that’s all that happened that night? And that was the last time you saw Rebecca?”

“That’s right,” Mark responded.

“She didn’t seem distraught or anything like that? Did she mention anything about going away for a while? Or did you hear anything from her friends? Something that might explain where she went and if she went there with this Nick fella?”

“Nope. I mean, I can’t really remember anything like that. You’re better off just asking Nick or one of her best friends. Like, um… like Jane or someone else. I wasn’t part of her circle. I was her boyfriend, but I was barely part of her life...”

Travis slid the notepad across the table and said, “Okay. *Okay.* Do me a favor: write everything you know about Nick on this sheet of paper. His full name, his age, his address or his neighborhood, the type of car he drives… Anything that would help us find him.”

Mark wiped his face with the back of his hand. His hand trembled as he jotted down some notes. The shaking wasn’t rehearsed. He was proud of himself—overjoyed, excited, *aroused.* He crossed his legs as his erection grew quickly. Manipulating members of law enforcement stroked his ego. *Better than porn,* he thought while fighting the urge to grin.

While Mark scribbled on the notepad, Darren said, “I want you to understand something, too. We *are* looking for her. This isn’t a game to us. I don’t want to intimidate you, but… please don’t leave town without informing us first.” He stood up and threw his business card on the table. He said, “If you have any questions or if you remember anything—anything at all—don’t hesitate to call.”

Travis placed his card on the table and said, “We’re always available.”

Mark handed him the notebook, then he grabbed the business cards. He said, “I’ll keep that in mind. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Are you guys going to talk to Nick?”

“We can’t discuss an ongoing investigation with a civilian. We’ll follow our leads, we’ll talk to people, and we’ll find Rebecca. If someone needs to be punished for this, we’ll make sure that happens. And, hey, if this was all a big misunderstanding and the girl’s fine, then I’d say that’s a happy ending for everyone involved. Just stick around, Mark. And you call us if you remember anything, alright? That’s very important.”

Mark said, “Yeah, okay. I get it.”

Darren opened the front door and stepped out.

As he exited the apartment, Travis said, “Thank you for your cooperation. We’ll keep in touch.”

The detective closed the door behind him. Mark glanced over at the window. He watched their silhouettes drift away from the apartment. He smiled, then he snickered, and then he guffawed. He felt nothing but relief and amusement. He sat down at his computer, turned on the monitor, and returned to his regular afternoon activities.

He watched cuckold porn and masturbated to ejaculation five times in an hour.

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Chapter Twelve

Day 33

“I’m sorry,” Mark said as he lit the candles in the bedroom. “I know I promised to visit you every night, but it’s been tough, baby. I had to miss a few days because of those damn detectives. For a moment, I thought they actually had something on me. But, no, I think we’re fine now. I haven’t heard from them since they first questioned me. So now I can see you every night again. Isn’t that great? Hmm? Did you miss me?”

Rebecca breathed throatily as she watched him. Starvation had rendered her lethargic. Her face looked hollow, eyes and cheeks sunken. Her body was thin and bony. She wasn’t lean, she wasn’t skinny, *she was gaunt*. Her bones—especially her ribs, kneecaps, and elbows—were visible even in the dark. Her skin was pale, her eyes were yellow. Flaky blood clung to her nostrils and stained her lips and cheeks. Although her face was cleaned a few days afterward, the homeless man’s crap remained smeared on her face—practically *ingrained* into her skin.

The deep lacerations on her forearms healed slowly. The cuts looked black while the skin around the gashes was red and swollen.

Mark scrunched his nose upon catching a whiff of the scent in the room. It smelled like death—old blood, rotting flesh, excrement—but Rebecca wasn’t decomposing. The stench stained every piece of furniture, every wall, and every floorboard in the room. It was powerful enough to cause nausea and headaches.

He tapped his nose and said, “This is a military-grade anti-dust, anti-pollution, anti-*everything* mask… but I can still smell you. You made a damn mess in here, Rebecca. We’re lucky I didn’t actually have to pay for this place. There’s no way I’d get a deposit back after all this damage.” He sat down beside her and asked, “Are you okay? You’re awfully quiet tonight. What’s the matter?”

Rebecca thought: *I can’t say a thing until you take this damn gag out of my mouth, you sick bastard!* Her teeth sank into the rubber ball. She managed to clench her fists, too, although that caused her arms to burn.

Despite the mask on his face, she noticed Mark was smirking. His cocky smile only made her angrier.

Mark said, “It’s the gag, isn’t it? I’m sorry, sometimes I forget all about that. And, besides, I like it when you’re quiet. So, you’re going to be quiet after I take it out, right? You’re going to be a good girl, aren’t you?”

Rebecca nodded reluctantly. Mark removed the gag. He avoided the red and yellow sores around her mouth. Rebecca hissed in pain as she licked her discolored lips. The herpes stung, but she was parched, so she couldn’t stop herself from licking her lips. She felt like screaming, too, but she was too tired to fight.

Mark said, “You’re still not talking. You’re probably sad, aren’t you? You’re just realizing that no one cares about you, that you’re a cold case, that you’re yesterday’s news. And it’s true. A few days ago, some asshole shot up a strip club, so everyone is talking about that. He must have been so insecure. I mean, can you imagine doing something like that? How much of a pathetic piece of shit do you have to be to hurt so many people?”

Rebecca couldn’t help but smile and titter. The irony struck her funny bone. Mark’s lack of self-awareness was stunning. She didn’t think he was kidding, either. She witnessed Mark’s bizarre transformation first-hand since her captivity began. He changed from a shy, insecure, and passive man to an egotistical, arrogant, and holier-than-thou sadist.

“You agree with me. I knew you’d agree with me,” Mark said. “People like that make me lose hope. It feels like the world is… it’s… it’s *imploding*, you know? Society is self-destructing and most people are just watching it happen. Sure, they get on Twitter and tweet about it, they ‘raise awareness,’ but at the end of the day, it solves *nothing*. It’s just going to keep happening. And, in the background of all this, people like *you* are forgotten. Yesterday’s news… I guess it’s better that way. Well, it’s better for me. It must be a nightmare for you, huh?”

“Wa–Water,” Rebecca said weakly, ignoring his rant. “Pl–Please, give… give me water. I’m… I think I–I’m dying.”

“You’re not dying. You’re not dying because I won’t let you die. We’re not finished yet, Rebecca. We have a long way to go.”

Mark grabbed a water bottle from his backpack. Little-by-little, he dumped water into her mouth. She gulped each satisfying drop.

Mark said, “I know you’re dehydrated, but we have to go slow. Trust me, I’ve done all of my research. Excessive water consumption after dehydration can be dangerous. Hell, just drinking a lot of water too fast can kill you, too. It’s called hyponatremia. It’s known as water intoxication or water poisoning. It’s pretty crazy, isn’t it? We need this to survive, but it can kill us. Anything can kill us. We are very frail. Ever since we started this, I feel like I’ve been able to look at life–”

“Mark,” Rebecca interrupted him before he could start another tangent.

Mark looked at her, curious. He dumped some more water in her mouth, then he dumped the rest on her forehead. He pulled a bottle of fruit punch-flavored Gatorade out of the bag.

He placed it on the nightstand and said, “To replenish your electrolytes later. It’s important.”

Speaking slowly, tired and sick, Rebecca said, “Mark, I’m sorry. You were right, I was wrong. I cheated on you with Nick. We went on dates, we kissed, and we had a lot of sex. It was… fun. That’s hard to admit because it means I’m a bad person, but I’m ready to admit it. I *am* a bad person. I made a mistake and I kept going with it just for ‘fun.’ And, after a while, it stops being a mistake and it becomes a… a habit. It becomes part of you, part of your personality. I fucked up, Mark. I’m a bad person and I’m sorry for the way I treated you. I really mean that.”

Mark stared at her with a deadpan expression. He always rambled when he visited her at night. He spoke about his day, the news, their past, and their future. But he was speechless after hearing her heartfelt apology. He wanted to believe she was trying to manipulate him, but he saw the sincerity in her eyes.

“I don’t blame you for hurting me, but this isn’t right,” Rebecca said, teary-eyed. “You’re killing me, Mark. I’ll do whatever I can to make up for my actions, but I can’t do that if I’m dead. And I don’t want to die. I’m so scared of dying, but I feel like it’s going to happen if we don’t stop this. My back… My back hurts so much. Let me go. At least let me stand up. Come on, just help me out a little. I’m begging you.”

“Roll onto your side. Let me take a look.”

Rebecca did as she was told. She rolled onto her left side, barely lifting her back from the mattress. Mark grimaced in disgust as he held a candle close to her body. Her upper back, shoulders, and ass were covered with

sores. Some of the sores looked like rosy, swollen abrasions, others looked like *craters* on her back. Yellow scabs surrounded the sores. They appeared to be infected.

"Okay, I've seen enough," Mark said as he returned the candle to the nightstand. "Go ahead, lay down like you normally do."

Rebecca whimpered as she rolled onto her back. Gritting her teeth, she said, "What's… wrong… with me?"

"It's just a case of bedsores. I thought this would happen. I don't think it's a big deal, baby. I wouldn't worry about it."

"But it hurts so bad."

"I know, I know. But, I have some good news. I've forced you to endure so much pain recently. I think it's time I pleasured you."

A sparkle of hope glimmering in her dim eyes, Rebecca stuttered, "Wha– What do you mean? Are you going to let me go? Is it… Oh God, is it finally over?"

Mark went to the closet. Rebecca writhed on the bed and sobbed. Her hope was extinguished just as quickly as it was ignited. Nothing good ever came from the closet—*nothing.* Mark returned to the bed with a resealable plastic bag. There was a purple G-spot vibrator in the bag.

He took the vibrator out and said, "I paid a woman to use this."

"A sick woman, right? A sick, *infected* woman?"

"That's right. You're starting to catch on, baby. The woman, she had gonorrhea and chlamydia. I'm sure there were plenty of other diseases brewing inside of her. To be honest with you, I think she might be dead already. When I had her play with this, she was resting next to a dead body. You believe that? We have a homeless problem in this city and no one is–"

"*Stop,*" Rebecca said sternly. "I don't want to hear it. I'm tired of hearing you talk about shit that doesn't matter to me right now. Just get it over with if you're going to do it. Please."

"Okay, jeez. I didn't know I was boring you. I was only trying to loosen you up. You know, I wanted us to be friendly. But, whatever. Let's get down to business."

Mark sat down at the foot of the bed. He didn't have to pry Rebecca's legs open because she did *not* resist him. She had given up all hope. He rubbed the tip of the vibrator against her dry labia—up and down, up and

down, *up* and *down*. He wanted to arouse her, but his efforts were fruitless. She was drier than a retirement home.

He forced the vibrator into her vagina. He wiggled it inside of her, he pulled it out an inch, and then he thrust it into her again. He moved slowly for a minute and then he sped up and then he slowed down again. Not a *peep* or a *squeak* emerged from her vagina. The silence disappointed him, but he didn't stop penetrating her. He was determined to spread the diseases.

Rebecca looked at the boarded window and frowned. Tears gushed out of her eyes and streamed down her filthy cheeks. The penetration wasn't physically painful, but it broke her heart and shattered her mind. She was being raped by her ex-boyfriend with a disease-ridden sex toy. In the bedroom—in that *dungeon*—she was broken.

As he continued thrusting the vibrator into her, Mark said, "I don't know how long gonorrhea and chlamydia last on surfaces. I, um… I 'infected' this toy about five or six weeks ago. I haven't touched it since. Haven't even opened the bag. I'm worried that the diseases might have died off, you know? Well, either way, that girl had *a lot* of health issues. I'm sure we'll get something out of this."

Something, Rebecca thought. *Something like what? Crabs? Genital warts? Syphilis? What else is there? Super-AIDS?!* She could hear herself screaming in her head. The sexually-transmitted diseases, all of them, terrified her. The situation was worsening, but she couldn't do anything to stop it. She was turning into the Noah's Ark of STDs.

"The thing about gonorrhea and chlamydia is: they don't have a lot of obvious symptoms," Mark explained. "For gonorrhea, women might bleed between periods. A man might have swollen testicles. That's a little more obvious, I think. I mean, women bleed from there wherever all the time, don't they? It might also cause infertility, but how the hell are we going to test that? Huh? You got any ideas?"

Rebecca shuddered and whimpered. She feared he would hire someone to actually rape her in order to test her for gonorrhea. She was sure he could find someone out there. He was able to purchase infected blood and sex toys after all.

Mark said, "Like chlamydia, it spreads through direct contact. It also spreads through blood. Fortunately for us, she was bleeding out of her

pussy when she used this toy. Chlamydia has some different symptoms, though. It causes, um… What did it say?" He stopped thrusting the toy and looked at the ceiling, as if he were thinking deeply about something. He said, "It causes 'genital discharge' and… and it might burn and hurt when you pee. You'll have some abdominal pain, too. Let me know if you feel any of those symptoms. It'll make things easier for you. Okay? Hey! Are you even paying attention?"

Rebecca felt like she was in an unusually detailed sex education class. She didn't want to hear about the potential diseases taking her body apart from the inside. Mark chuckled and shook his head, as if to say: *oh you!* He kept thrusting the vibrator into her, trying his best to hit her cervix. Then, he stopped mid-thrust.

A *thud* meandered into the room. It was close—*too close.* Mark and Rebecca looked at the bedroom door, wide-eyed.

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Reinvigorated by the sound, Rebecca lifted her head from the pillow and yelled, "Help! Help me! I'm in here! Please! I'm here!"

Mark stumbled over her body. He placed his hand over her mouth. The *whack* of his gloved hand hitting her face echoed through the apartment. Rebecca cocked her head back, then she chomped down at the side of his hand. The glove was thick, but Mark felt her teeth. He groaned and whimpered, pain surging across his hand and terror poisoning his mind. He feared he would be infected if she tore through the glove with her teeth.

His mind was flooded with the most pessimistic possibilities: *she infected me, the cops are in the living room, I'm so dead.*

In a panic, he struck the side of Rebecca's head with his other free hand. She continued screaming with his hand between her teeth. So, he struck the side of her head with his knee. Rebecca's head fell limp against the mattress. She heard a *buzzing* sound in her right ear. She was barely conscious, mumbling for help.

Mark swung down at her face with the bottom of his fists—left, right, left, right. More blood oozed out of her red, broken nose. Rebecca was knocked unconscious after the fifth blow to her temple. She snorted and groaned, as if she were having trouble breathing.

Mark staggered out of the bedroom, gloves smeared with blood. He didn't close the door behind him. Shock stopped him from thinking

logically.

A homeless man had entered the apartment. He walked with a clumsy, stiff-legged gait. He bumped into the walls, the refrigerator, and the kitchen counters. His arms as stiff as his legs, he grabbed trash off the floor—food wrappers, crumpled balls of paper, used syringes—and stuffed it all into his bulky coat's pockets. He chuckled and mumbled to himself incomprehensibly.

The man stood six-two with a lanky physique. He was young, no older than thirty. His skin and clothes were covered in soot. Clumps of mud and feces hung to his dirty blonde hair. Locks of hair nearly covered a straight, horizontal scar across his forehead. His blue eyes were gentle and innocent, like a child's eyes. His life was full of hardship, and he didn't even know it.

Mark glanced over at the front door. He tried to retrace his arrival at the apartment that night, but he couldn't remember if he closed the door behind him. He had kept Rebecca captive for over a month and he *never* forgot to close the door. He couldn't blame anyone but himself for the mistake. He found a silver lining, though. He figured the homeless man was mentally impaired, so he could easily trick him and get away scot-free.

Mark asked, "Who are you? What's your name?"

In a slow, deep, and strained voice, the homeless man said, "My name is Che–Chester."

"Chester? Okay, it's nice to meet you, Chester. Now, what the hell are–"

"What's yours?" Chester interrupted, smiling.

"My name isn't important right now. What are you doing here?"

"I wanna know your–your–your name."

Mark rolled his eyes, then he said, "Well, let's just say my name is Nick. It's Nick Moreno, okay? Now answer my damn question. What are you doing here?"

"I'm collectin' stuff. We always need new stuff. They like these," Chester said as he pulled a handful of syringes out of his pocket. Some of the needles stabbed his palm, but he didn't seem to feel any pain. He said, "They're special 'pens.' They give me toys for 'em. You got any pens, Mr. Doctor?"

"Doctor?" Mark repeated in a curious tone.

He looked down at himself. In some twisted way, he resembled a doctor—a raggedy, *bloody* surgeon. He turned his attention back to Chester and

watched as he teetered around the bedroom. He smiled behind his mask. *I'm in the clear,* he thought, *he's like a kid, I'll just give him a few syringes and he'll be on his way.*

Before Mark could try to manipulate him, Chester asked, "Where's the girl?"

Mark stopped smiling. He responded, "I don't know what you're talking about."

As he scanned the floor for more syringes, Chester tapped his head and said, "That screamin' girl. She's here, ain't she? I hear her at night. Is she okay? I think you can help her, Mr. Doctor."

"Get out."

"I just need pens. Let me get some–"

"Stay back!"

It was too late. Chester had made his way to the bedroom doorway. Over Mark's shoulder, he spotted Rebecca handcuffed to the bed. Despite his mental disadvantages, he could connect the pieces.

Mark grabbed Chester's shoulders and said, "I'm sorry."

He headbutted him. The edge of his goggles split his chin open. A streak of blood splattered on Mark's face—from his goggles to his mask. More blood rushed out of Chester's chin, dripping down to his tattered clothes and torn boots. Chester lost his footing and landed on his back, the floorboards howling under him. But he managed to smile and laugh through the pain. He didn't understand the situation.

Mark kicked his stomach and knocked the air out of him. He said, "Stop laughing. Stop it, you idiot. Why did you have to come in here? Huh? You think I want to do this? You think I'm some sort of monster? Goddammit, I didn't want to kill anyone else! I just want to be left alone with my girlfriend! Why the hell did you have to come in here?!"

"I need pens," Chester said, chuckling.

Mark kicked his face. A cracked, decaying tooth flew out of his mouth, ejected by the impact of the blow. Chester closed his eyes tightly and groaned loudly. He was dazed by the kick, but he remained conscious. Mark straddled the homeless man's chest. Tears flooded his goggles, which blurred his vision. It was better that way. It made committing murder easier.

He smiled and said, "I should have done this with Tyler. Poor kid, he…" He shook his head as he pushed the guilt out of his mind. He said, "No, that

wasn’t my fault. He should have just sold me his blood. It was his fault. And this is yours. You shouldn’t have walked in here, you idiot! You fucking idiot! You both deserve to die!”

He swung down at Chester’s head, hitting him with jab after jab. He was strong, but he wasn’t a trained fighter. He didn’t know how to drop his body weight into each punch. With the thick rubber of the gloves, however, he managed to tear a massive gash over Chester’s right eyebrow. Geysers of blood squirted out of his head.

Chester finally recognized the severity of the situation. He grabbed Mark’s arms at the wrists and screamed. He wiggled under him, twisting his body left and right. Mark lost control of him. He fell to his side in front of the refrigerator, then Chester mounted him. Despite his lanky appearance, he felt *heavy*—maybe it was all of the trash in his pockets, perhaps it was some variation of hysterical superhuman strength.

The homeless man yelled as he hit him. He didn’t know how to fight, so he just threw his stiff arms at Mark in hopes of landing a decent punch—and it worked. One blow shattered Mark’s nose. His ‘military-grade’ mask was quickly soaked in blood. He tasted it as it entered his mouth. Another blow cracked one of the lenses of his goggles. A hit to the temple caused his vision to fade away for a second.

Oh, shit, he’s stronger than Tyler, Mark thought. *He’s a fighter, he’s been through this before. I have to do something before he kills me.*

He couldn’t swing at Chester’s face due to the man’s fast, flailing arms. So, he struck his sides. He hoped he could break his ribs, but his layered coats acted like a suit of armor. He looked to his left, then to his right. He grabbed a plastic gray grocery bag and swung it at Chester’s face. The bag covered his face and obscured his vision for a few seconds.

Mark looked to his left again. He grabbed a crushed tin can. He thrust the tin can at Chester’s neck. The sharp edge of the can penetrated his jugular. Blood dribbled out—just a few droplets. Then Mark wiggled the can *inside* of his throat and slid it across his neck slowly. Blood shot out of his severed jugular and splashed on Mark’s face, but he didn’t stop until he slit his throat from ear-to-ear.

More blood exploded out of his other severed jugular, too. From below, blood cascading over Mark’s face, it looked like water from a fireman’s hose—*so much blood.*

After allowing himself to bleed out for fifteen seconds, Chester grabbed his own neck with both hands, as if he were trying to strangle himself. He struggled to his feet, then he lurched backwards until he hit the wall beside the bedroom door. He smiled and he tried to laugh as he limped into the doorway. He looked at Rebecca, and Rebecca looked back at him.

He tried to say something to her. It looked and sounded like: *hi, you're the screaming girl. Do you have any pens for me?* Then he collapsed.

***

Rebecca had awoken during the fight. Horror movies and grotesque novels—*fiction*—couldn't prepare her for what she witnessed. She saw Mark beating on Chester, then she saw Chester gain the upper hand. She cheered for him, although the men didn't hear her during their brawl. Then, she saw a violent murder. Her ex-boyfriend killed an innocent homeless man before her very eyes.

Mark wiped the blood from his goggles as he stood up. Out of breath, he stumbled through the living room. He closed the front door, made sure it was locked, and then he teetered back to the bedroom. He removed his mask and tossed it into the closet. He cleaned himself with water from another bottle, then he put on a flimsy white surgical mask. He grabbed Chester's limp arms and dragged him into the room. He left the dead body near the closet door, giving Rebecca the perfect view of death.

Covered in blood, he sat down beside Rebecca and caught his breath. He patted her thigh and muttered something to himself. It was something along the lines of: *that sure was something, wasn't it?* Rebecca stayed quiet, eyes and mouth wide open. The murder kept playing in her mind, like a scene from her favorite movie. But it wasn't pleasant. It was stunning, horrific, and traumatizing.

Mark said, "I don't think anyone will come looking for him. I'm too tired to do anything about him now anyway. That stupid bastard was strong… I'll go home, but there's something I have to do first."

"What?" Rebecca asked, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

Mark grabbed a chef's knife from his bag and said, "I need to write."

"No, no, no. Please, Mark, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Shut your damn mouth. If you didn't scream every night, if you just followed my directions like a good girl, this would have never happened.

You have to be punished. Accept it, learn from your mistakes, and move on."

"Oh my God! Why?! Why me?!"

Mark grabbed her jaw with a tight grip and pushed her chin up, effectively silencing her. He cut into her forehead, directly under her hairline. Rebecca squealed like a dying pig in a slaughterhouse. The forehead was one of the most sensitive parts of the human body. The burning pain from each cut—curved, straight, and jagged—radiated across her head.

From temple to temple, he carved four letters on her brow. In all capitals, the word read: *CUNT.*

He crawled down to the foot of the bed, his legs between hers. He placed his palm on her stomach. Her sweat and her panting caused his hand to glide across her soft skin. Under her bellybutton, he sliced her with the tip of the blade. He wanted to avoid using too much pressure. If she even hiccupped, the knife would slip and cut into her organs.

From hip to hip, he carved six letters. The first and last letters were capitalized. The word read: *AnimaL*.

Rebecca lifted her head from the mattress and stared down at herself. She couldn't read the word due to her cloudy vision, but she felt the stinging pain from each cut. Blood from the wounds on her forehead dripped into her eyes, further damaging her vision. Her head hit the mattress with a *thud* as she fell unconscious.

Mark wasn't done. Eyes bulging from his head, he rubbed the spine of the blade against her labia. He thought about mutilating her genitals. The clitoris had eight-thousand sensitive nerve endings. It was the center of pleasure—and a potential point of unfathomable pain. He imagined himself *snipping* it off or lighting it on fire.

Instead, he sliced into her pubic region, cutting through her bush like a deforester. Rebecca regained consciousness as he carved the fourth letter into her crotch. As soon as she spotted him near her groin, she instinctively tried to kick him. The handcuffs stopped her from reaching him.

"Get away from there," she hissed, her pelvis trembling from the pain.

Mark responded, "I will, but it's not because you're telling me to. It's because I'm done. You stupid *slut.*"

SLUT—it was carved into her crotch, although the word was partially obscured by her pubic hair. Droplets of blood hung from the hair, like water hanging from wet eyelashes.

Mark tossed the bloody knife into the backpack and he pulled a brown bottle out. The label on the bottle read: *hydrogen peroxide.*

He unscrewed the cap and said, “This is going to hurt, but it’s for your own good.”

“Don’t. I don’t need it, Mark. Please, just take me to a–”

He dumped the hydrogen peroxide on her crotch. As she convulsed in pain, he moved up and dumped more of it on her stomach.

He moved up to her head and said, “Close your eyes, honey. If you get this in your eyes, it can cause permanent damage to your corneas.”

Rebecca couldn’t hear him over her screaming. Mark dumped the hydrogen peroxide on her forehead anyway. White, fizzling foam filled the letters cut into her flesh. The hydrogen peroxide killed the bacteria while sending jolts of overwhelming pain throughout her entire body. She looked like she was going into shock with the way she shook.

Some of the solution landed in her left eye, too. The burning sensation in her eye reverberated *into* her skull, causing her brain to throb. She swore she felt her brain pounding against her skull.

Mark mounted her and said, “Doctors advise *against* using hydrogen peroxide to clean wounds nowadays. It can damage the tissue and delay the healing process, you know? It’s…” He stopped and sneered in annoyance as he listened to Rebecca’s hysterical crying. He muttered, “What’s the point? You’re not listening anyway.”

He swung down at her face. She stopped screaming after the first punch, but Mark didn’t stop punching her. He attacked her with a flurry of jabs and hooks. *Thud*, *thud*, *thud*—the sound of his fists hitting her head was unnerving. He felt and heard his knuckles *crunching* with each punch, too. After thirty-four punches, he leaned back and examined the damage.

Rebecca’s face was swollen, her skin painted with tints of red, purple, and blue. She couldn’t open her left eye. It swelled shut because of the hydrogen peroxide and the beating. Blood oozed out of the cuts on her puffy, chapped lips as well as her broken nose. The bruises, the blood, the swelling, the cuts—she was unrecognizable after all of the torture.

Mark stood up from the bed and gathered his supplies. He dumped some water into Rebecca's mouth. She drank at least four ounces, then she started coughing and gagging. He dumped the rest of the water on her face. He only wanted to keep her alive. He looked at Chester's dead body, then he shrugged and walked out of the room.

"I'll clean that mess some other night," he said as he closed the door and checked the lock. "Or maybe I'll leave him in there as a decoration."

Rebecca shuddered, the handcuffs jingling like wind chimes. She breathed throatily in pain and stared at the ceiling with her only good eye.

"How… can I… kill myself?" she croaked out. "Why can't I… die already?"

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Chapter Thirteen

What I've Become

Mark sat in front of his computer. He stroked his erect penis while watching rough, violent porn. In the video, a young brunette woman, no older than nineteen years old, was *ravaged* by five men. The men choked her, slapped her face and breasts, and spit on her. They rammed their dicks down her throat until she vomited. They penetrated her vagina and her anus—*sometimes simultaneously*.

The young woman screamed at the top of her lungs. She squirmed in pain, she begged them to stop, and she even cried for her mother. There was suffering in her voice. She took a few acting classes, but she wasn't *that* good. It wasn't a pleasant experience, it wasn't a normal pornographic video. The truth was: she was most likely tricked into making that movie.

And she felt helpless afterward. She was violated, brutalized, and dehumanized.

The men tortured her over the span of thirty edited minutes and then they sold the footage online to customers like Mark at a premium price. It went by many names: *brutal gangbang (real audio); cute teen destroyed by big cocks; hardest gangbang of all time;* and *the red room.* Yet, despite its brutality, the video—and all of its pirated copies—attracted tens of millions of views.

Mark saved the video on all of his favorite porn sites. He memorized every line of unrehearsed dialogue, he remembered every detail of the actress' damaged body. When he watched it, he liked to replace the actress with Rebecca. He imagined his girlfriend in her prime, moaning loudly as she was raped by a group of handsome men.

"Yes, baby, yes," he whispered as his breathing intensified. "You love those dicks, don't you, Rebecca? You love them more than me, don't you? It doesn't matter. I don't care anymore. Get fucked, baby. Get fucked by everyone and everything. Oh, *yes*, baby, let's make this a reality. I'll… I'll bring them to you. I'll pay them to fuck you in that little room of ours. Yeah, I'll make it happen and… Oh, shit, I'm about to–"

Someone knocked on the door before he could ejaculate. He looked at the window and listened to the rain pattering on the glass. He didn't see anyone standing outside of his apartment. He checked the time on his computer. The clock read: *11:23 PM.* He figured it was too late for a visit from any detectives. If the cops wanted him, they would have broken his door down. He minimized the window and turned off his monitor, then he went over to the front door and opened it.

He smiled for a nanosecond before he forced himself to stop. A smile translated into arrogance, and arrogance during a criminal investigation could be linked to guilt. He didn't want to seem too cocky while his girlfriend was 'missing.' But he'd be lying to himself if he said he wasn't overjoyed by his visitor's arrival.

Nick Moreno stood in front of him. Rainwater dripped from his wavy hair and soaked his clothes. His hazel eyes lost their sparkle, dull and distant. He looked serious.

Mark asked, "What do you want?"

"Can I come inside?" Nick asked.

"No. What do you want?"

Nick was tall enough to look over Mark's head. He saw a dark, empty, and dirty studio apartment behind him. He looked to his left, then to his right, as if he were about to break into a house.

He leaned closer to Mark and said, "I'd rather do this somewhere more private, but whatever. If you want to do it here, we'll do it here. So, let me break some things down for you, man. I was with Rebecca. I was dating her for months before… before she disappeared. And, yes, we had sexual relations behind your back. We fucked. I'm sorry for stepping on your toes, I'm sorry for everything. Okay? I mean that. I. Am. *Sorry*."

"I knew all of that already, Nick. I accepted it a long time ago. Is that all you wanted to say? Whatever. I forgive you. Go home and get some–"

Nick put his foot in the doorway and stopped Mark from closing the door. He said, "That's not all. I *loved* Rebecca. I fucked up by getting with her when she was with you, but I *really* fell in love with her. I need help finding her, Mark. The cops, they're out of leads, man. I don't even think they care anymore. They need to find runaway teenagers before they can find my Reb… before they can look for Rebecca. I get it, but I can't accept it. We need to find her!"

“Hey, hey, hey. Calm down, alright? I cared about her, too, but I don’t know what you want me to do. You were the closest person to her before she went missing. And it’s been, like, five or six weeks already. If the police couldn’t find her, what makes you think I can? I’m just a guy who works at a fast food restaurant for fuck’s sake.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” Nick said, leaning in closer to Mark’s face. He jabbed his finger at Mark’s chest and said, “You’re not just ‘a guy who works at a fast food restaurant.’ You were her boyfriend. I was on the side, I wasn’t *that* important to her, but you two were a ‘thing’ for years. You have to have some idea of where she might have gone.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re not even going to think about it? Huh?”

Mark shrugged and said, “I thought about it after I found out she was missing. I couldn’t think of anything. To be honest, I thought she ran off with you. So, I let her go already. She’s off somewhere doing whatever she wants. I wish her the best, but I’m not chasing after her. That’s final.”

The men stayed quiet for a minute, glaring at each other. Only the sounds of the passing cars and the surrounding drizzle broke the silence.

Nick sneered and said, “You’re different, man. You’re changing. Before I started seeing Rebecca, you–”

“You mean, before you started cheating with Rebecca, right?” Mark interrupted.

Nick said, “It doesn’t matter. I remember seeing you at parties before all of that. You were always smiling, always grateful. Even if you knew about… about us, I know you pretended to be happy because you loved Rebecca. You didn’t want to hurt her. Hell, you’re the type of guy who couldn’t hurt a damn fly. So, what happened? Is it because we went behind your back? You stopped caring about her because of our little affair? You stopped caring about people because of that?”

Mark stepped forward, which caused Nick to step back. He leaned against the doorway, his legs and his arms crossed. He wasn’t persuaded by Nick’s speeches. He didn’t care about him or anyone else.

He said, “Look, you’re young. You’re, um… What do they call you? I don’t like ‘privileged.’ It sounds like I’m complaining when I say that. You’re… sheltered. The truth is: I realized the harsh realities of our society. I was living a lie, Nick. I never cared about people. Like most people, I was

just playing a role so I could fit in. These days, I'm living for my own pleasure. I guess you can call me a nihilist. Yeah, that's what I've become."

"A nihilist… or a psychopath?"

The men stood in silence again.

Mark asked, "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Nick huffed, then he said, "Fuck you, man. I'm going to find Rebecca, with or without you. You know what? Actually, I think I might use you. Yeah, I'll follow you. Even if I have to sit out here all day or sit outside of Big's Burgers, I'll be there and I'll be watching you. 'Cause I think you know more than you say you do. You know where she is, don't you, bastard?"

Mark played it cool, although he instantly thought about killing him. He only spoke to Nick in order to avoid arousing any suspicion in the first place. He was worried about Nick's snooping, but he knew there was nothing he could do about it at the moment.

He said, "Well, you're welcome to watch my boring, uneventful life as much as you want. It won't get you any closer to Rebecca. For all I know: *you*, Rebecca's young, stupid boyfriend, tried to get rid of her because she was pregnant or something. *You* should be the prime suspect. *I* should be following *you*, damn it. The cops should be on your ass."

"Is that what you told them? Huh? Is that why they came to talk to me?"

"Have a nice night, Nick. I guess I'll be seeing you around."

Mark slammed the door and secured the locks. Nick wiggled the doorknob, then he banged on the door, and then he tapped the window with his car key. He tried to peek into the apartment, but he could barely see through the rain, the blinds, and the curtains.

He yelled, "You gotta get back to your porn, right?! That's your pleasure, isn't it? You sit there and you jack off all fuckin' day! Fuck you, Mark! I'll get her back and I'll make sure you never see her again, motherfucker." As he walked away from the apartment, tears flooding his eyes, he muttered, "I know it was you, damn it. What did you do to my girl, punk?"

Mark sat down in front of his computer and pulled his sweatpants down. He restarted the video and began masturbating.

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Chapter Fourteen

You're Responsible, Too

Nick sat in the driver's seat of his muscle car in the parking lot of *Big's Burgers*. He watched as dozens of customers entered the fast food joint during the lunch rush. From his parking spot, over the crowded patrons, he could see Mark working at the cash register. He kept his eyes on Mark's car, too. He was ready to chase him down if he tried to sneak away.

But Mark stayed at his workstation throughout most of his shift. He was sent to clean the restroom every other hour and he spent forty-five minutes eating lunch in the break room, but he didn't leave the restaurant all day. And, after work, as he walked back to his car, Mark even waved and winked at Nick.

"You cocky rat," Nick muttered. "Stop fucking with me and take me to her. Come on, you little bastard, don't make me kick your ass in public."

He followed Mark away from the restaurant. In the afternoon, Mark went grocery shopping, he rented a movie from a Redbox kiosk, and he ate dinner at a McDonald's. Then he went home and he stayed there until nightfall. It seemed like a normal day, like yesterday and the day before.

Eyes heavy with sleep, Nick's head bobbed up-and-down. Before Nick could doze off, Mark stepped out of his apartment at the dead of night. He glanced over his shoulder suspiciously as he locked the front door, as if he were making sure he wasn't being followed anymore. Nick lowered his head to the steering wheel and narrowed his eyes to a squint. He wanted Mark to believe that he had fallen asleep.

"Where are you going now?" Nick whispered.

Without moving his head, Nick followed Mark with his eyes. Mark drove off in his hatchback. Nick waited in the apartment building's parking lot for fifteen seconds, then he followed Mark's path. He kept his distance and drove without his headlights, hoping to avoid the police. To his utter surprise, he followed Mark to the abandoned side of the city.

There were no cops out there.

Nick said, “Okay, um... Where are you taking me, Mark? Why are we driving through here? Is this... Is it...” He let out a shaky sigh. He whispered, “Are we going to the scene of the crime? Did you actually hurt her? Please—*please*—don’t tell me you hurt her. Prove me wrong, man.”

He scanned his surroundings while cruising about fifty meters behind Mark’s vehicle. He saw homeless people in every alleyway, huddling for warmth and walking in circles while babbling to themselves. The street corners were controlled by drug dealers and prostitutes—and their rowdy friends. The population thinned out as they drove deeper into the neighborhood.

Mark parked beside an abandoned five-story apartment building. He climbed out of his car with a backpack slung over his shoulder. He strolled into the building, walking as if he had been there before.

Nick dialed 911, but he stopped himself before he could call the police. He thought: *what if he’s trying to set me up? What if he’s trying to make me look like a stalker? They’ll think I did the same to Rebecca, won’t they?* Although Mark entered a condemned building—therefore *trespassing* and breaking the law—Nick was in fact stalking him. And a history of stalking didn’t look good under the circumstances of Rebecca’s disappearance.

“Fuck it,” he said as he hopped out of the car.

He jogged up the sidewalk, then he dashed into the building. He slid to a stop in a lobby, garbage bags and crumpled newspapers rustling under his boots. He used the flash of his phone’s camera to illuminate the dark building.

To his left, there was an empty reception area. At the other end of the lobby, there were ceiling-height windows leading to a private pool. The pool water was replaced with mountains of trash—broken furniture, dirty mattresses, cardboard boxes, rotten food, and garbage bags. A dead body could have been buried under all of the trash and no one would have noticed.

Nick shone the light at the ceiling. He heard a pair of footsteps upstairs. He went up the stairs to his right. He stopped in the second-floor hallway. None of the apartments had any doors. He approached the first doorway to his right: *apartment 2B.* He saw a homeless man in the living room, unconscious under a tattered tarp. He couldn’t tell if he was sleeping, intoxicated, or dead.

He looked up at the ceiling upon hearing the footsteps again. The footsteps sounded louder than before. Someone wanted to be heard.

Nick went up the stairs. He didn't bother checking the other apartments. He only thought about Rebecca and Mark—*love* and *vengeance.* He stopped in the fifth-floor hallway. The footsteps came from the last apartment on the right. He walked down the corridor, glancing into each apartment on his way to the end. He didn't realize it, but he was holding his breath every step of the way.

About five meters away from the doorway, the footsteps stopped. Nick stood in the hall and stared at the door, sweat dripping down his brow. He was stiff, nervous and afraid. He was scared of the secrets lurking in the apartment. He didn't know what he would do if he found Rebecca's corpse in the building. He feared Mark and his unpredictable personality, too.

Nick stepped into the doorway. The living room looked empty, unfurnished and devoid of life. A pile of flattened cardboard sat at the center of the room, surrounded by hills of trash. The glass sliding doors leading to the balcony were shattered, the shards of glass sparkling in the moonlight. He stepped forward, ready to find the truth.

Mark stood with his back against the wall near the doorway, a steel claw hammer in his right hand. Before Nick's boot could touch the floorboards, Mark swung the claw of the hammer at Nick's knee. The claw shattered his bone, penetrated his skin, and tore into his cartilage and tendon. Nick screamed as he lurched forward. He lost his footing and collapsed beside the flattened cardboard.

The young man's screaming echoed through the building. After all, the walls weren't soundproofed, the windows weren't boarded, and there were no doors in the apartment. The floorboards rumbled and groaned when he fell, too. It sounded as if a dresser had fallen over. Yet, no one came to his aid. He was shunned by the homeless drifters.

Nick grabbed his busted kneecap with a tight grip. Blood soaked his jeans and wet his hands. He looked at his attacker and panted, horrified.

"You bastard!" he barked. "I knew… I *knew* it was you! You sick bastard! Oh God, you… you pussy! You… You… Goddammit, how could you do this to me? To Rebecca?!"

Without taking his hands off his knee, he wiggled a few inches back as Mark approached him. He looked over at his phone. He dropped it near the

entrance of the apartment, the light aiming up at the ceiling.

“Stay away from me!” Nick shouted. “You stay away from me, fuck-face! If you touch me again, I swear–”

“I didn’t touch you, I *hit* you,” Mark interrupted.

“I’ll kill you,” Nick finished his sentence.

“You’ll kill me? Well, that gives me a good reason to defend myself, doesn’t it?”

“Wha–What? No, wait, don’t–”

Mark swung the hammer down at Nick’s knee. He struck Nick’s hand, snapping his fingers like twigs. The face of the hammer struck the gushing gash on his knee, too, further aggravating the wound. Veins bulged from Nick’s face and neck as he wept. He waved his limp hands as if he had just touched a hot kettle on a stove. The sound of his bones *popping* was muffled but loud.

Mark seized the opportunity. He spun the hammer around, then he swung its claw at Nick’s busted knee again. The hammer slipped through the tear in his jeans and the claw was driven deeper into his kneecap. He tried to pull the hammer out, but it was jammed in his leg. He wiggled it inside of his kneecap, turning his ligaments and tendons into mush.

Nick writhed and wheezed in pain. He was drenched in a cold sweat. He felt warm blood running down his shin, but he couldn’t feel his knee. He nearly fell unconscious due to the shock. Mark put his foot on Nick’s stomach to stop him from standing up. He moved the hammer very gently, but he didn’t try to pull it out. He wasn’t ready to end his pain.

He said, “You realize you’re responsible for this, too, don’t you? Mr. Nick Moreno, you dashing son of a bitch, you are partly responsible for *everything* that has happened. You knew what you were getting into when you met Rebecca. You knew we were dating, but you still slipped in and seduced her. You ruined our chances of salvaging our love. You took it away from us and tried to birth something new.”

“I… I loved her,” Nick croaked out.

“No. No, you didn’t. You fell in love with her, but don’t try to pretend like it was love at first sight. Everyone knew you were messing around with every girl who was willing to touch your dick. When I first found out she was cheating on me with you, I was actually worried I’d get some sort of STD. It was fuckin’ scary, man.”

“Don–Don’t do this. I’m begging you.”

“Begging won’t help you. I feel no mercy for you. I mean, how could I? You’re a douchebag. You’re an asshole. You’re a *selfish cunt*. You never respected me or anyone like me. You only cared about yourself, about your pleasure. Hell, I guess that makes you a nihilist, too, right?”

Mark yanked the hammer out of his knee. A geyser of blood shot out of his leg along with a chunk of his tendon. Despite the pain, Nick instinctively grabbed his mutilated knee with his broken hands. Mark bent over and swung the hammer at Nick’s head. The hammer collided with his jaw. His jaw *popped*, knocked off its hinges, and his head fell limp against the cardboard. His arms fell to his sides while his brutalized leg shook violently.

Nick groaned and snored loudly. He was knocked unconscious for twenty seconds. He gasped as he awoke, startled and confused. He didn’t remember arriving at the apartment. It was as if that memory had been knocked out of his head by the blow to his jaw. But he recognized Mark and he remembered the beating. He knew he was in danger.

He rolled onto his stomach, then he wiggled towards the balcony. He panted and whimpered as waves of pain surged from his knee, his hands, and his broken jaw, pulsating across his body along with his heartbeat. Mark chuckled as he watched him. His victim was moving *away* from his only viable exit after all.

Walking slowly behind him, Mark asked, “Did it feel good when she sucked your cock? Did it feel good when you cummed inside of that warm, tight pussy? Did it feel good when she… when she let you fuck her asshole? Jesus, she never let me do that. She was disgusted when I first asked, but that’s not the point. Did it feel good knowing you did all of that while she was in a relationship with me?”

Nick reached the balcony, glass *crunching* under his body. He felt the cool breeze against his warm skin. He thought: *why am I so hot? Am I dying?* He looked around, but his vision clouded over.

Mark stepped on the back of his head, applying pressure slowly in order to extend the pain. Nick grimaced and gasped as the shards of glass cut into his face. A massive shard protruded from his forehead, near his left temple. The smaller shards stabbed his cheek and nose. The puny glass fragments, like dust, entered his left eye, immediately causing his eye to hemorrhage.

Tears welling in his eyes, Mark asked, “Did it feel good knowing I would kiss her lips after she sucked your dick? That I would eat her out after you filled her pussy with your cum? Hmm? Is that why you always smiled at me when we saw each other? You weren’t being nice, were you? You were being a douchebag, just like always. You made me into a cuck… and now you’re fucked.”

He swung the hammer down at Nick’s left arm. He struck his elbow—one, two, three, four, five… *fifteen times.* The *thud* of each blow, along with Nick’s desperate screaming, echoed through the neighborhood. The beating sounded like someone hitting a marble countertop with a hammer. His elbow cracked, then it was dislocated. His bone, ligaments, blood vessels, and nerves were *crushed.* If he survived Mark’s attack, he would surely lose his arm.

The sleeve of his jacket was doused in blood. Blood splattered on Mark’s face every time he raised the hammer over his shoulder.

Mark shouted, “You little punk! You cheater! You deserve to be punished, just like Rebecca!” He swung the hammer down at Nick’s upper back, hoping to sever his spinal cord. Between each hit, he said, “I’m going to… paralyze you. I’ll tie you up… and I’ll lock you in a room. I can get… *more blood.* I can find… *more diseases!*”

Nick grabbed a shard of glass in his right hand. Exerting all of his energy, he turned over and stabbed Mark’s calf in one swift move. Mark yelped and staggered. The hammer slipped out of his hands as he leaned against the railing, plummeting five floors to the ground.

Nick sat up and grabbed Mark’s leg, like a dog humping his owner. He stabbed his thigh twice. The shard sank deeper into his fingers, it nearly severed his pinky, but he didn’t stop. He couldn’t feel his hands anyway. He stood up, putting all of his weight on his only good leg.

He stabbed Mark’s stomach. He slowly slid the shard across his lower abdomen, tearing through his t-shirt and flesh. He didn’t have time to think about his actions. Even if it were unlikely or impossible, he wanted to disembowel and kill Mark before dying himself.

Mark didn’t realize he was stabbed in the stomach until his adrenaline rush faded. By then, the shard had reached the center of his abdomen.

He grabbed Nick’s wrist and stuttered, “You–You sta–stabbed me…”

His legs wobbled under him, he felt nauseous and lightheaded, but he stayed on his feet. He pulled his head back, then he thrust it forward. He headbutted Nick with all of his might, nearly spraining his neck in the process. Nick teetered back, blood oozing from his gums. Weak but determined, he stabbed Mark's upper abdomen directly below his ribcage. The stab wound was a centimeter deep and an inch wide.

With his back against the railing, Nick slid down to his ass. The pain finally caught up with him. Mark grabbed a fistful of his hair, then he struck his face with his knee. The back of Nick's head hit the railing with a *clanking* sound. Mark couldn't stop himself from beating Nick, pounding his face repeatedly with his knee. An unquenchable thirst for vengeance consumed him.

A massive gash stretched across the bridge of Nick's broken nose. Goops of slimy blood mixed with mucus hung from his nostrils. Red, bumpy, and swollen, his lips looked like a monstrous balloon animal. His eyes were swollen shut, tears squeezing out of his red eyelids and rolling down his bloody cheeks. A cut formed on the back of his head, too.

Yet, he managed to stay conscious during the entire attack.

Mark pushed his head back and examined the damage as he caught his breath. He said, "You're… a tough guy… aren't you? It doesn't matter. You already… lost. And I… I won. *She's mine,* motherfucker."

He hooked his arms under Nick's armpits and lifted him from the floor. He held his jacket at the chest and pushed him back over the railing.

He said, "You're a failure, Nick. Your money… No, your *parents'* money can't save you from the real world—from *this* world. You couldn't save the girl you 'loved,' either. Instead, she's rotting away in some abandoned apartment. Beaten, bruised, disease-ridden… And it's all your fault. You ruined our fairytale and you turned it into a horror story for Rebecca. The ending will be unforgettable, but it's too bad you won't be around to see it."

"I… want to… see her," Nick croaked out. "Don't… Don't hurt her any–"

Mark pushed him off the balcony. In less than two seconds, Nick hit the ground head-first. A sonorous *thud* accompanied the *crunching* sound of his bones cracking. His head was split open from his forehead to the back of his skull. Through his bloody hair, parts of hemorrhaging brain were visible in

the wide gash. His spinal cord was shattered upon impact. His body lay on the sidewalk, bloodied and contorted.

Mark whispered, “That’s it? Why didn’t you scream?”

He limped his way through the building. He looked into some of the apartments. The homeless people in the building were unconscious—or dead. They didn’t care about the violent brawl in the fifth floor. Outside, no one approached Nick’s dead body. Gangbangers loitered around the street corners, homeless people slept in the alleys, but *no one* cared about the screaming, the violence, and the death.

“Just another day in the neighborhood,” Mark whispered as he staggered towards his vehicle.

He fell into the driver’s seat of his car, his shaky hand over his stomach. He grimaced and whimpered in pain as he removed his shirt. He placed a stack of gauze pads over the gash on his stomach, then he wrapped a gauze roll over the pads three times over. He slowed the bleeding, but he couldn’t stop the pain. He shoved two more gauze pads into his jeans to cover the stab wounds on his leg.

The stab wound on his upper abdomen stung and bled, too, but he ignored it. He tossed on a fresh black t-shirt and then he drove off.

As he cruised through the neighborhood, Nick’s dead body a mere speck in his rearview mirror, Mark said, “I’m dying, but I have to finish this first. I have to end it. I have to… to break up with her.”

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Chapter Fifteen

Day 48

Mark stumbled into the renovated apartment. He cried as he fell to his knees near the front door. Yet, he also felt some relief. The living room was empty. *No more homeless intruders*, he thought. He kicked the door shut behind him, then he dragged himself to the bedroom door. From the floor, he punched in the code on the lock: *1541*. The hinges squealed as the door swung open.

“Holy shit,” he muttered. He leaned on the doorway and got wearily to his feet. He illuminated the room with the flash of his cell phone’s camera and said, “I can’t believe you’re still alive, baby. Look at yourself. My God, just look at yourself…”

Rebecca suffered through excruciating pain due to malnourishment. The fat disappeared from her bruised face and limbs, but her stomach appeared to be bloated. Her skin was dry and flaky. Locks of her disheveled hair fell from her head, like petals from a dying rose. The bedsores across her shoulders, back, and buttocks were visible whenever she moved.

The sexually-transmitted diseases festering in her body began to manifest. Rashes spread across her back and chest. She could scratch her back against the mattress, but she couldn’t relieve the itch on her chest. Her left eye was permanently damaged by the hydrogen peroxide. She experienced blurry vision in her right eye.

She contracted HIV.

There was a mound of thick brown vomit beside her head. It looked like a pile of shit. She felt a *tight* feeling behind her ribs, as if one of her organs were about to pop. The tight feeling was accompanied by a burning pain that radiated across her lower back. She didn’t know it and Mark couldn’t see it, but her liver had swelled up.

She contracted hepatitis-b.

Urine, feces, and blood stained the puppy pad under her ass. Her anus was red and itchy, a blister blocking part of the opening. Yellow and green discharge—chunky in texture—seeped out of her vagina. She felt like she

was pissing acid every time she urinated. She felt nausea and abdominal pain, too.

She contracted gonorrhea and chlamydia.

Rebecca could barely see Mark through her unfocused vision. But she noticed the loose end of bloody gauze roll hanging from his abdomen. She noticed his limp, too.

“What… happened?” she asked weakly, her voice as raspy as a chronic smoker’s.

Mark shambled into the bedroom. He shone the light at Chester’s dead body in the corner of the room. Chester had been decomposing for two weeks. His skin turned red and green, bloody foam dried around his mouth, and bodily fluids leaked from every opening on his body. Mark knew he couldn’t pin the blame solely on the body, though. He smelled the miasma of death hanging over the bed.

He sat down beside Rebecca and said, “I fucked up, but I’ll be okay for now. I think I can survive for a few more days.”

“Sur–Survive? Wha–What did you… do?”

Mark illuminated the carvings on her flesh. The words on her forearms —*cheater* and *whore*—became scars. The cuts on her stomach and pubic region—*animal* and *slut*—were infected. The wound on her forehead, which spelled ‘*cunt*,’ healed faster than the others. In the dark, barely lit up by the phone, it looked like a tattoo on her brow.

He caught a glimpse of her white tongue as she breathed throatily. He noticed the cysts protruding from her hairy vagina and sprouting from her lips. Her genitals suffered the most. There was a lump the size of a golf ball near the vaginal opening—a thick, painful Bartholin’s cyst.

“What did… you do?” Rebecca repeated.

Mark sighed, then he said, “Well, I got into a little ‘scuffle’ with Nick. To be honest with you, before he showed up at my door a few days ago, I *almost* forgot about him. And it’s weird, you know? At the end of the day, you cheated on me. That’s true and it’s undeniable. But it takes two to cheat, doesn’t it? I took my anger out on you, but he should have been here with you. It’s his fault, too. He… He started all of this.”

Her good eye filled with tears, Rebecca stuttered, “I–Is he o–okay?”

“Who?”

“*Nick.* Is he okay?”

Mark smiled and said, “He’s not okay. I’m not okay. *We’re not okay.* Nick is dead, Rebecca. I beat him with a hammer, then I pushed him off a fifth-story balcony. He got me good before he died, though. I think… Christ, Rebecca, I think I’m going to die next. We’re all dying, aren’t we? How did we end up here?”

Rebecca trembled so violently that her teeth chattered without her moving her jaw. The tears vibrated in her eye, then a drop rolled down the side of her face. She couldn’t scream, so her weeping was inaudible. She was devastated by Nick’s death. She pictured herself running away with that man—*marrying* that man. It was more than a fling.

Mark lay beside her, his head on her right arm. He made direct physical contact with her—no gloves, no goggles, no mask.

He said, “I’m scared of dying, baby. I’m in pain. I can barely breathe, but… but I feel happy.” He sniffled as tears rolled down his face, too. He glided his fingertips across Rebecca’s stomach and said, “I think Nick was the root of all of our problems. That cocky little bastard ruined everything for us. So, even though you did something bad to me, I need to apologize to you for what I’ve done. I’m sorry, Rebecca.”

“You… You were the… the problem,” Rebecca responded, weak but furious.

Mark ignored her. She gasped as he kissed her ribs. The same question echoed through her mind: *why? Why? Why?* Mark licked the crease under her breast, then he kissed her bony sternum while squeezing her other breast. She felt him humping her hip. He was aroused by Nick’s death and fell in love with Rebecca again. He found his happiness.

Rebecca asked, “Why? Mark, what… what do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m going to… make love to you… one last time,” Mark responded, pausing frequently to kiss her. He looked up at her face, a breast in each hand, and he said, “I love you, baby. I need to do this before I move on with the rest of my plan. It won’t work if I don’t.”

“What are you going to do?”

“It’s over for you—*for me*—so I want to make sure it ends for everyone else, too. If we can’t be in love forever… then no one can. After everything we’ve been through, I don’t think this world, this society, deserves love. They deserve pain.”

“Oh my God, Mark, what are you going to do? This isn’t right. You did this to us. You put us here.”

“It doesn’t matter. All that matters now is that we love each other.”

Rebecca closed her good eye and cried, “No! No, Mark, I don’t love you.”

Mark squeezed her breasts and sucked her nipples. He licked her collarbone, then he moved his tongue towards her right arm. He licked her moist armpit hair before sucking on the scars on her forearm.

Rebecca tried to wiggle away, but she could barely move. The handcuffs didn’t matter anymore. Truth be told, she had lost so much fat in her arms that she could have slipped out of the handcuffs days ago with a little bit of effort. But she was too weak to move. Malnourishment crippled her, depression discouraged her.

Mark moved down to her stomach. He licked a circle around her bellybutton, then he flicked his tongue at the cuts across her lower abdomen. He tasted her blood. He slid his tongue down to her crotch. He sucked on her cuts through her pubic hair. Bloody pubes stuck out from between his teeth. He tried to spread her labia, but her Bartholin’s cyst was too thick. It covered the opening of her vagina.

He buried his face in her crotch and performed cunnilingus—licking, spitting, *slurping.* He sucked on the massive, fluid-filled cyst, too. He could even taste the rancid pus, but he didn’t gag. His tongue and lips trembled with excitement. He loved the flavor of Rebecca’s cyst-riddled vagina. He pushed his tongue against the Bartholin’s cyst, hoping to extract more of the fluid.

Rebecca didn’t feel any pleasure. Although his tongue was soft and moist, each lick caused pain to emanate from her crotch. She was disgusted by his actions. He wasn’t making love to her, he was *raping* her. And, for some unknown reason, he was willingly attempting to contract her diseases. It frightened her.

“S–Stop,” Rebecca stuttered. “Pl–Please, Mark. You don’t… You don’t understand what you’re doing. You’ll get sick. You’re killing yourself.”

Mark sat up in bed and said, “I understand what I’m doing. This was always one of the, um… one of the possible outcomes. I’m ready for this.”

He pulled his pants and boxers down. His erect penis flopped out. The bloody gauze pads fell off his leg, revealing the deep stab wounds on his

thigh. Blood continued to pour out of the cuts. He shuffled forward on his knees until his dick was less than three inches away from her vagina.

He smiled and said, “Our deaths will be romantic, Rebecca. Like when old couple’s die one after the other. Grandpa dies of old age and, a week later, grandma dies from a broken heart. That’s something special. That tells us that they were living vicariously through each other. So when you die, I die. And when I die, you die. And we’ll most likely die from the same cause. It can’t get more romantic than that.”

“Oh no. Oh God, no. You can’t–”

Mark thrust his penis into her, pushing past her Bartholin’s cyst. He gasped, a shot of ecstasy shooting through his body. He fell on top of Rebecca, his face against her chest. He thrust into her slowly, barely moving inside of her. Her bumpy cysts added more ridges and folds inside of her vagina, amplifying the pleasure.

Rebecca whimpered and squirmed under him. She clenched her fists, curled her toes, and closed her good eye again. She attempted to mentally escape the bedroom, but to no avail. She couldn’t ignore the pain, she couldn’t block out Mark’s moans of pleasure. Sex was supposed to be an act of love between two consenting adults. At that moment, she felt nothing but hatred for him.

Mark thrust faster as he felt some moisture in her vagina. At first, he thought it was his pre-ejaculate. There was too much fluid inside of her, though. *She’s wet, she’s creaming for me*, he thought, *I finally made her horny.* In reality, her cysts burst during the rape. White and yellow fluid, slimy like mucus, glistened on his dick and filled her vagina.

“You’re so wet, baby,” Mark said in a sultry voice, his ass tightening with each thrust. “I love you so much. You know that? I never stopped loving you, even when I knew you were with Nick… Oh fuck, you’re so wet and tight. It’s amazing…”

“Get off of me,” Rebecca responded without looking at him.

Ignoring her, Mark said, “I thought about living as a cuck after I found out. I thought I could watch you fuck him, maybe even eat his cum after, but no. It wouldn’t work out that way. Nick was the problem, and now he’s gone. It’s just us, baby. Fuck, I love you so much, Rebecca. You don’t even know!”

“Stop! Stop it, damn it!”

“I’m almost there. Oh shit… I’m… I’m cumming!”

Mark couldn’t hold it. He grunted and groaned as he ejaculated inside of her. His ass tightened again and his legs trembled. He thrust into her a few more times, then he pulled out and lay beside her. He nuzzled her neck and kissed her shoulder. Blood, pus, and semen leaked out of Rebecca’s vagina.

Rebecca whispered, “No, no, no… How could you do this to me? Why would you do this? Why?”

“Because I love you,” Mark said. He kissed her shoulder again, then he said, “I wish we could have had a baby. Even if it were born sick or premature or whatever, I would have loved to have a child with you. It was my dream, you know?”

“Mark… Mark…”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Mark, you’re sick and demented. You won’t… get away with this. When they catch you, they’ll lock you away for the rest of your life. You won’t be in jail or prison or anything like that. No, it’s… it’s straight to the padded room for you. Straight to the straitjacket. And it’s sad because you don’t even realize what you’ve done. You punished me. That’s what you think, right? But you just infected yourself now. You killed yourself. It’s… It’s *pathetic* that you can’t see that.”

Mark sighed and stood up from the bed. He lifted his pants and boxers up, but he stopped before he could cover his crotch. With the light from his phone, he caught a glimpse of the slimy fluid on his penis. It looked orange because of the blood and the pus, which ranged from white to yellow—and even some green.

He buckled his pants and said, “No, Rebecca. *We* killed ourselves. We’re both responsible for this. I want you to know that.”

Rebecca asked, “What are you going to do?”

Mark limped to the door. He was tired from all of the violence and sex. He felt some satisfaction, though. In the back of his mind, he hoped he impregnated Rebecca.

Rebecca said, “Wait. If this is the last time we’ll see each other, I want you to…” She paused to swallow the lump in her throat, then she said, “I want you to kill me.”

Mark stopped in front of the door. He stared ahead vacantly and considered her request. Death was his end goal after all.

Without looking back at her, he said, “I can’t do that. I want you to die from natural causes. I’ll try to do the same, but I’m afraid it won’t be possible. I’ve lost a lot of blood. Death from loss of blood isn’t exactly natural, is it?”

Rebecca lunged forward and shouted, “Neither is this! Natural causes? Natural *fucking* causes?! You did this to me, you monster! There was nothing natural about this! You infected me, you killed me! You sick bastard!”

“Goodbye, my love. I’ll see you in heaven.”

“I hate you! I hate you so much! You’ll pay, Mark!” Rebecca yelled. She sobbed as she watched him exit the room. As the door closed behind him, she cried, “I hate you so much… Why did you do this to me? Why? We loved each other. How could you do something like this? Mark… Mark, please don’t leave me.”

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Chapter Sixteen

The Best Burgers

Mark stood in the doorway of Rebecca's bedroom. A beam of early morning sunshine penetrated the cracks on the boarded window. The room reeked of human waste and death. The stench, like rotting meat mixed with shit, stained the room. Flies buzzed over the bed, soaring around each other like fighter jets in a dogfight. Rats managed to enter the room through a hole in the closet. Some of the rodents chewed on Chester's throat, others found their way onto the bed and ate Rebecca's thin, yellow fingers.

"Ten days," Mark whispered. "I had to stay away for ten days to make sure you were dead. I didn't want it to end like this, but it was the only way."

He walked into the room, trying his best not to limp. He sat down beside Rebecca's dead body. He swiped the rat away from her hand. The rat squealed as it fell to the floor, then it scampered towards Chester's decomposing body. He tried to swat the flies away, too, but the flies kept buzzing past his ears, as if they were purposely trying to annoy him.

He placed a rose on Rebecca's cleavage. Then, he pulled a small velvet ring box out of his coat pocket. He opened the box, revealing the princess cut diamond ring inside. It was a beautiful and expensive engagement ring worth one-thousand five hundred dollars. He showed it to Rebecca, acting as if she could see it in her deceased state.

He grabbed her left hand and examined the tiny, bleeding bite marks on her fingers. He slid the ring down her stiff, cold ring finger.

"Perfect," he said as he patted the top of her hand. He kissed her forehead, then he kissed her lips. He said, "You know, before Nick came into the picture, I wanted us to get married. I imagined us being together forever. I thought about our honeymoon, our first home, our first child… If we had a boy, we'd call him 'Michael.' I think that's a strong name. If we had a girl, we'd call her 'Layla.' I don't know. I read it was a popular name these days and I like it. I think it's pretty."

He looked at Rebecca and frowned, as if he had just realized that she couldn't respond to him. For the first time in weeks, he felt alone again—*truly alone*.

He sniffled and said, "I'm sorry for everything, honey. I'm going to make things right, okay? They'll know our pain."

He retrieved a small glass vial from his coat pocket, then he pulled his pants down. He leaned over and sucked on her cold, crusty nipple as he stroked his cyst-riddled dick. He whispered indistinctly and he moaned in pleasure. A cyst popped during his masturbation, causing him to shudder and hiss in pain. He used the gooey pus and his pre-ejaculate as lubricant.

After five minutes of stroking, he ejaculated into the vial. His urethra *burned* with each spurt of semen. The pain caused him to sweat and whimper, but he caught every drop of his semen in the container. He looked down at his penis. Blood began to bubble out of the ruptured cyst, blending with the pre-ejaculate and pus. He wiped his penis on his boxers, then he lifted his pants up.

As he carefully closed the vial, Mark said, "I think this is enough. Thank you for this. It's important." He kissed her lips again, then he said, "I'll meet you soon. I love you, angel."

He walked out of the bedroom, but he left the door open behind him. He didn't close the front door, either.

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"You look like shit, Mark," David Diaz, the manager of Big's Burgers, said. "Are you sure you want to be here today? You can take a few more days off if you need 'em."

Mark smiled and said, "I'm fine. I'm just a little sleep deprived, you know? It's not like I'm sick or anything like that."

David looked him up and down. Black bags hung under Mark's eyes, his sclerae stained with a slight tint of yellow. His uniform was immaculate, wrinkle-free and clean. Surgical tape strips and bandages kept his wounds from leaking. He took one caplet of Aleve before work in order to help him fight through the pain. From afar or through a quick glance, he looked like a regular man.

David said, "You don't have a runny nose, you're not coughing or puking… Fuck it, get in the back and start cooking. If you start feeling sick or even a little lightheaded, you tell me. Okay?"

“Will do.”

“Alright, get ready for the lunch rush,” David said as he walked away.

Mark went into the kitchen and nodded at his fellow cooks—a middle-aged man and a young woman. He put on a hairnet and a pair of gloves. Then he started flipping burgers and frying fries.

While doing so, he nicked his wrist under his sleeve with a knife. He covertly squirted his infected blood onto each beef patty. He spit into the boiling oil and attempted to contaminate the fries. He served some milkshakes and soft serve ice cream cones, too. He dripped some of his semen from his vial onto the desserts.

He grinned from ear-to-ear every step of the way. To the customers and his fellow employees, it looked like good customer service—*service with a smile.* He was delighted by his deviant, dangerous behavior. He didn’t care about the customers or their satisfaction. He only hoped he could infect as many people as possible.

After the lunch rush, Mark leaned over the counter and ate some fries. He couldn’t help but smirk as he watched the customers.

A young couple munched on burgers and fries at a table for two. They were on a road trip, heading north to Canada. A small, generic family—a middle-aged father and mother, a teenage son, and a teenage daughter—ate at a booth. They planned on visiting a sick relative at the hospital afterward. At another table, a single mother tried to feed her three children while eating a burger herself.

A five-year-old girl sucked down a vanilla milkshake through a straw while tossing a few fries into her mouth. She was a beacon of innocence, she was only a child.

Mark smiled at her and whispered, “I’m doing you a favor, kid. The world is a nasty place filled with nasty people. We’ll start fixing that today. You go to school and you play with your friends on that playground. You spread this to every–”

“Mark,” David said from the kitchen. “Go refill the condiments.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sure. No problem, boss.”

Mark approached the self-serve condiment dispensers near the booths. He opened the cabinet, then he crouched in front of it. He refilled the ketchup and the mustard, his back to the customers. He squeezed his wrist

and squirted some blood into the ketchup. He didn't want to change the color of the mustard, so he drooled into it instead.

He turned to leave, but he stopped after the first step. The five-year-old girl stood behind him, watching him with her head cocked to the side. Mark thought: *how much did she see? Will she tell anyone? Does it even matter now?* The girl didn't see him bleed or drool into the condiments, but she recognized his suspicious behavior. Something was afoot, but she didn't say a word about it.

Mark smiled nervously and nodded at her, then he walked away. He went to the restroom. He covered the wound on his wrist with a Band-Aid, he washed his hands and face, then he returned to his workstation. He finished his shift without taking any other unnecessary risks. He figured he did as much as possible to spread his diseases by using the restaurant's customers as vessels.

"It just needs to multiply," he whispered as he approached his hatchback. "One infects another, then another infects another, and then another infects another… It multiplies."

***

Mark stared at the website, one hand on his erect penis and the other on the computer mouse. He visited an online escort directory. Women of all backgrounds gathered to offer their services to horny customers from across the country. The internet changed everything for the prostitution industry. The street corners were reserved for two-dollar hookers.

On the website, Mark met women like Kinky, who swore she had a 'body that would arouse a dead man.' He also connected with Chyna. She promised to pamper and satisfy her clients through what she called a 'high-class partnership.' Then there was little Leah, a four-eleven Thai woman who called herself the 'Gentleman's Choice.' Most of the women offered the complete girlfriend experience—*GFE.*

Mark chatted with dozens of escorts. Some of the prostitutes required extensive background checks—photocopies of ID cards, LinkedIn and social media accounts, pictures, *references.* He failed some of the background checks, but fortunately for him, many of the escorts were lenient. New clientele was difficult to acquire due to the increasing competition.

He avoided law enforcement by performing his own background checks, too. He checked verified review boards where clients actually *reviewed* escort agencies, individual prostitutes, and the services provided. He performed reverse image searches on Google to find fake and stolen pictures. He searched every phone number, too.

Prostitutes provided a seemingly infinite list of services, but there were only two types of calls: *incall* and *outcall.* During an incall, the client visited the escort at her place of business. During an outcall, the escort visited the client at his home or at a hotel. Many escorts avoided cheap hotels and homes in impoverished neighborhoods.

So, Mark rented a room at a five-star hotel for five nights. Every day, he met a selection of unique escorts. Some of the women were local, others met clients around the world. He was interested in all of them. They were the perfect vessels to spread his diseases: sexually active with multiple partners, constantly traveling across the country and around the world, and willing to do anything for money.

He withdrew his life savings and maxed out his credit cards in order to pay the escorts for their services. He even paid them extra for bareback sex. Some of the escorts rejected him after spotting his scarred, bumpy penis, forcing him to wear a condom. Others ignored his penis or completely missed it because of the darkness in the room. They didn't know what they were getting into.

Over the course of five nights, he met thirty-eight escorts. He had consensual bareback sex with twenty of them. He removed the condom during sex without informing four naïve escorts—too trusting for their own good. He found himself in a state of endless euphoria. The sex was good, it was fantastic, but the mere thought of spreading his diseases overjoyed him more than anything else.

He swore he even recognized one of the prostitutes as an up-and-coming porn star. She allowed him to fuck her without a condom for an extra five-hundred dollars. He ejaculated inside of her, filling her with his warm, foul semen—*a putrid creampie.* He wondered if she would take an STD test before her next performance.

Resting on a king-sized bed in his hotel room, he stared at the ceiling and said, "This was a good week. I lived the best life. I redeemed myself. I've found my purpose. This… *This* is what I was meant to do." With tears

in his eyes, he smiled and said, “It’s almost over, Rebecca. I just need a little more time. I’ll see you soon, baby. I love you. I know you love me, too.”

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Chapter Seventeen

Spread the Love

Mark sat in the driver's seat of his car. Black from head-to-toe, he wore a beanie, a bomber jacket, a t-shirt, jeans, and boots. A cold sweat glistened on his face and neck. The sweat soaked through his shirt and jeans, too. He suffered from a severe fever. He felt his blood boiling in his veins. His eyes were as yellow as a great gray owl's and his cheeks as hollow as a corpse's.

He sniffled as he stared out the windshield. Beyond a small wooded area, covered in leafless trees and shrubs, he could see the homeless encampment under the freeway ramp. He watched the transients as they wandered the encampment, ate beans and huddled around bonfires, and slept in their tents. Then he shook his head slowly.

He groaned as he pulled a plastic bag out of the backpack on the passenger's seat. His muscles ached with the slightest movement. He opened the bag and looked inside.

The bag was filled with over one-hundred hypodermic needles. He purchased some of the needles online and he acquired a few from the local clinics. After his euphoric time with the escorts, he spent a week walking through the impoverished neighborhoods of the city, collecting the needles littering the streets—the used, dirty, *hazardous* needles.

Mark whispered, "Okay, okay. This is easy. I just… I just have to do it. Just a quick poke and it's done. It's easy."

He pushed his sleeve up, then he took a needle out of the bag. He looked at the used needle—stained with the residue of melted black tar heroin—then he looked at his arm, and then he looked back at the needle. He choked down his anxiety, he shrugged, and then he sighed, as if to say: *here goes nothing.* He stabbed his forearm with the needle. A droplet of blood came out of the puny puncture wound.

He successfully infected the needle, if it wasn't already infected with someone else's diseases.

He repeated the process with the other needles. When he ran out of room on his forearm, he switched over to his *other* arm. And when his other

forearm was covered in puncture wounds, he started stabbing his stomach and calves. Blood dripped down his arms, stomach, and legs, like rainwater on glass after a storm.

He had lost more blood during his fight with Nick, but he was already anemic, so he felt like he was slowly draining himself of life. He saw Death in his rearview mirror, closing in on him like a hunter tracking its prey. But he didn't stop until he infected *every single* needle. He was too close to the finish line to quit—too close to seeing Rebecca again.

After stabbing himself for the hundred-and-ninth time, he returned the needles to the bag. He took a large resealable bag out of the glove department. That bag was filled with rocks of black tar heroin, each individually wrapped like Halloween candy. He purchased the heroin from a 'friend' in the area. That bulk purchase didn't get him a discount, either.

"It–It's over," he mumbled, his words slurred. "It–It–It's all o–over, guys. This is… how… how it… how it ends."

Mark staggered out of the car with the bags. He shambled through the mud and shrubs, occasionally leaning against a tree to regain his balance and catch his breath. He made his way to the homeless encampment. He held the bags over his head and shook them, as if he were bringing food home to a starving family.

He cracked a smile and, between breaths, he said, "I've got… black tar… and needles. Come get some. Come on, the… the candy-man is here."

Some of the transients ignored him. He looked like another sick homeless man who found his way to their home. Some of them understood his language—*black tar, needles, candy-man.* They approached him, walking, jogging, and even crawling to him. They welcomed him with open arms, greeting him like they would a long-lost brother.

In less than a minute, he was surrounded by twelve homeless people—four men, six women, and two female teenagers. One of the men was missing a leg, dragging himself across the mud just to reach him. The teenagers looked like young high school students—sophomores, *maybe*. All of them were covered in soot and grime.

Mark was immediately overloaded by their overlapping voices. One of the men said something along the lines of: *come on, brotha, whatcha' got for me? Come on, I just need one more hit.* One of the teenage girls kept repeating herself: *please, please, please.* The man on the floor spoke a

different language, but it didn’t matter. His voice was so gurgly that his words were indecipherable.

Speaking over them, Mark shouted, “Listen! You can have this… this smack! *This dope!* But only under one condition!”

“What is it? What is it, man?” a man asked, speaking quickly.

“You… You have to use the needles that I give you. *Free* dope and *free* needles. Do we have an agreement?”

Two women left the group. They had clean needles from a clinic in their tent. They were addicted to drugs, they made some bad choices throughout their lives, but they weren’t about to use needles from some sick stranger in exchange for some heroin. They would rather beg for cash or sell themselves. That way, they could at least choose their customers and lower their risks of contracting deadly diseases.

Yet, despite the departure of the two women, *more* homeless people gathered around Mark upon hearing his offer. There were eighteen homeless people around him—then nineteen, *then twenty.*

As he handed out the drugs and needles, Mark said, “I’ll be watching you. I want you to… to have a good time. So, shoot up and get high. Share… *Share* with your friends. These needles are good. You can reuse them. Get every last drop of this dope.”

From outside of the circle of addicts, a man shouted, “These people don’t need more drugs, goddammit! We need jobs! You damn leech! What the hell is this? You think you’re helping these people? You ain’t helping. This right here is evil.”

“Fuck off!” Mark yelled without making eye contact.

“No, *you* fuck off! You’re poisoning us! You’re the reason people look down on us! You! *You*, mister, are what’s wrong with the world. Help us, damn it! Jobs! Jobs! We want jobs!”

The homeless man sounded as if he were trying to start a chant during a protest. To his disappointment, the addicts ignored him and his other peers were too tired to help.

“You’re a monster,” the man muttered as he walked away, glaring at Mark.

Mark kept handing out the needles and heroin, unperturbed by the man’s rant. He hesitated for a moment as a woman approached him. Most of the woman’s bruised face was hidden by the hood of her sweater, but he

recognized her. Amber Page, the woman who played with his sex toy, stood before him, her hands out as if she were Oliver Twist—*'please, sir, I want some more.'* She was either beaten by a pimp, a robber, or a John—or all of the above.

Mark handed her four rocks of black tar heroin and two needles. Amber smiled and nodded at him, tears of joy welling in her eyes.

Before she could walk away, he grabbed her arm and pulled her back. He said, "Two rocks for you. Share the others. And share those needles. Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Of course," Amber said, the tears rolling down her black, swollen cheeks. "Thank you so much."

"Thank you, too. Spread the love, baby."

Mark watched as the woman ran back to her tent, giddy with excitement. He wondered if she continued sleeping with the corpse. He didn't really care. He passed out the rest of the heroin. When he ran out of heroin, he gave out the rest of the needles along with some cash—fives, tens, and twenties. He told them to run to their neighborhood drug dealer to buy more drugs. And he repeated his rule: *use this 'special' needle or else.*

Most of the homeless drug addicts listened to him. They took his drugs, they took his money and bought *more* drugs, and they used his needles, passing them around like a blunt at a high school party.

As he limped through the encampment and watched the excessive drug use, Mark shouted, "After this, go home and kiss your loved ones! If… If you left your family or your family left you, go back to them! Fuck your spouses! Cum inside of them and make 'em feel your love. Then… Then fuck your kids! Fuck your friends, too! Fu–Fuck 'em good… You spread the love that I spread to you, and I *promise you* more good will come. More heroin, more pleasure, more love. Don't stop! Keep going! This… This is just the beginning!"

Some of the homeless people thanked him for his gifts. A few of them were even inspired to return to their families, unaware of the new diseases eating away at their bodies. The infected needles reached every corner of the city, passed on to fellow transients or abandoned on the streets to be used by desperate drug addicts.

Hepatitis-A once stained the sidewalks of downtown San Diego, creating a public health emergency. Mark dreamt of streets infected with HIV, hepatitis, gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, and *all* types of bacteria,

spreading through feces, urine, drug use, sex, and violence. He dreamt of a dirty, toxic apocalypse.

Mark walked past the encampment. He walked through another swath of trees and bushes under the freeway. He knew where he was going. It took him five minutes to climb over a twelve-foot chain-link fence. He fell on the other side, his shoulder *popping* as he hit the ground. But he didn't cry or complain. He struggled to his feet, he patted the dirt off his clothes, then he kept moving.

He found his way to the reservoir on the outskirts of the city. The artificial lake stored the city's water, including its potable water. He limped across one of its piers. He knelt down at the end of the pier, his legs shaking under him, and he stared at his reflection on the water. His skin was pale, his lips looked purple, and his eyes turned yellow.

He looked sick, but he was happy. A slick, shady smile stretched across his thin, hollow face. His snicker evolved into a chuckle and then he laughed heartily.

He leaned forward and fell into the reservoir. He wondered if his diseases would survive in the drinking water. He imagined families of all backgrounds—rich and poor, black and white, and everything in between—chugging the infected water as he drowned peacefully.

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By signing up for my mailing list, you'll be the first to know about new releases, deep discounts, and special promotions. You'll only receive one or two emails per month. You might receive three sometimes, but I'm *not* a spammer. It's all about the books in my mailing list. It's fast, easy, and free, so visit this link to sign-up: http://eepurl.com/bNl1CP.

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ar Reader,

Hey! Thank you for reading *Lovesick.* This novel was a *little* different compared to some of my past work. If you've been reading my books for a long time, you know I tend to write about serial killers, vengeful people, and cannibals. *Lovesick* was a strange hybrid, wasn't it? It had 'romance,' murder, revenge, and plenty of body horror. Were you offended by the violence in this book? If so, you probably shouldn't have ignored the **warnings** all over the place. Don't worry, it's fiction. Parts of the book could happen in real life, your lover might be stalking you *right now,* but this book was a work of fiction. Let's just take a moment to relax…

I finished writing this book before Christmas Eve 2018, but I had been planning this book since 2017. It went through several different phases. The original idea was to make it personal. By that, I mean: it was going to be autobiographical. Before you jump to any conclusions, *no,* I have never stalked anyone. I had planned on writing the first half of the book as a sort-of love story—*my love story.* Then, during the second half, I wanted the story to seamlessly transition into a work of fiction. I had titled this version of the book: *Fictional Nonfiction.* (Maybe I'll still use that title for something else in the future, who knows?)

The idea wasn't to *punish* someone who cheated on me through fiction. It was never supposed to get that close to reality. Instead, I wanted the second half to be more surreal and nightmarish. It would have still been gory and nasty, but more like something Clive Barker would create. And I would have tried to create an atmosphere/mood similar to one of my favorite video game series, *Silent Hill*. Writing about it again, going over my old thoughts… I feel like going back and finishing that old project, too! So, let me know if you're interested in reading the *original* version of this story.

For *Lovesick*, I wanted to create a sense of realism. I wanted you to feel like this could actually happen to you or a loved one. So, Mark's obsessive behavior was very important. On the other hand, despite her cheating, I also

wanted you to feel some sympathy for Rebecca. She wasn't perfect, but no one really is. And, at the end of the day, no one (except convicted pedophiles, rapists, and serial killers) deserves torture like that. But it wasn't just the 'love'-aspect that I wanted you to remember.

Love-*sick.* Sickness. Bacteria. Diseases.

Some diseases aren't easily transmitted. I want to make that clear. For example, it's generally safe to hug and kiss someone with HIV. The same goes for hugging or kissing someone with hepatitis. But diseases can spread through human waste, blood, and other bodily fluids. So, what if someone put their infected blood in your food? What if someone put their *semen* in your milkshake? Could that spread the disease? I'll be honest: I don't have the answers. I didn't want to give you the answers in this book, either. I just wanted that *idea* to linger in your mind. So, always be nice to gray-collar workers, especially if they're handling your food. Even if the idea doesn't scare you, it's good to be a decent human being.

As usual, if you enjoyed this book, *please* leave a review on Amazon.com. Your reviews help me improve and they help other readers find my books. More feedback leads to better books, which usually leads to more readers—which in turn leads to *more* books. You get the idea. Your review is very important, even if it's only a few sentences long. You can try answering questions like this to get started: *did you enjoy the book? Was it too extreme, just-right, or not extreme enough? Was it gross? Did you research Bartholin's cysts after reading it?* (Okay, you don't have to answer that last question.)

I'm doing well. Well, I feel like I might have a hernia, but my doctor is awful and he ignores everything I say. Otherwise, I'm still alive and I'm still writing. I visited Japan in February for the first time in my life. It was actually my first time on a plane! The flight wasn't too bad, but the jetlag was absolutely awful. It took days before I finally got myself a good night of sleep. The trip inspired some new books, too. You'll see many of these during the second half of 2019 and beyond. I really want to start

experimenting, but I plan on keeping the same dark, provocative tone throughout most of my books.

Once again, if you enjoyed this book, feel free to visit my Amazon's author page and check out my other novels. I've slowed down a bit recently, but I'm still releasing new books frequently. (My books are usually a little longer than others in the genre, too.) If this is your first time reading a book of mine, I am an extreme horror author, but I also dabble in the supernatural horror, thriller, fantasy, and science-fiction genres. I tend to focus on the darker side of human nature. I'm a provocateur, really. Next month, I'll be releasing *The Taste of Blood*, a book about a teenage girl who believes she's a vampire. You don't want to miss that. Thanks again for reading!

Until our next venture into the dark and disturbing,
Jon Athan

P.S. If you have any questions or comments, or if you're an aspiring author who needs *some* help, feel free to contact me directly using my business email: info@jon-athan.com. You can also contact me through Twitter @Jonny_Athan or my Facebook page.

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